

MARX AND MORALITY

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Several influential interpretations of Marx claim his theory of social change is amoral, that Marx had only an incoherent moral conception, or that Marx had moral commitments early in his career but abandoned them, perhaps at the writing of *The German Ideology* but certainly before *Capital*. I argue that none of these is correct.

Morality, for Marx, is thoroughly historical: it is produced through human activity; whether particular actions or social arrangements are moral or immoral varies at different historical stages; and its realization in human practice and the closure of the gap between "is" and "ought" would lead to the abolition of morality as the theorization of that gap.

Marx determines what society would be best for human beings and which existing forces and historical processes could realize it. He morally evaluates social systems, theories, and human actions with respect to whether they promote or inhibit the increase of human beings' rational control over their own environment and social development, and the historical emergence of "rich individuals".

Famously, Marx refers to morality as "ideology". Interpreters of Marx have assumed that ideology is always reactionary or misleading. However, ideology plays an important role in the development of revolutionary consciousness. Ideology can serve as a bulwark of reaction; however, Marx shows that the proletariat must develop its own ideology to theorize social

contradictions and determine how they can be overcome to allow for a conscious, democratic, and rational control over human beings' social existence.

In the first chapter of my dissertation, I provide a detailed overview of Marx's moral theory and its basis in his conception of human nature and alienation. The remainder of the dissertation follows the development of Marx's moral thought chronologically, starting with Marx's early works including *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*, continuing with the period including works such as *The Communist Manifesto* and *On the Poverty of Philosophy*, and ending with Marx's late work including the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. I conclude by drawing together the study's main themes and suggesting avenues for further research.

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PREFACE

I am greatly indebted to many who have inspired, encouraged, and assisted me along the path that has led so far to the production of this document, a work of which I am quite proud. I am extremely grateful to have had the means and the opportunity to create it. My dissertation committee—Michael Thompson, John McDowell, Peter Machamer, and Tommie Shelby—were always very positive and encouraging about my work as it progressed in draft form, a kindness that has been invaluable to me since to write a dissertation is a notoriously nerve-rattling process. My committee provided thoughtful feedback, guidance, and support while giving me a great deal of freedom, space, and trust to pursue this project in my own way. In the course of my studies, I have also benefited from the kindness and encouragement of other present and former faculty at Pitt, both within the Philosophy Department and outside of it. Among these are Laura Ruetsche, Andrea Westlund, Anil Gupta, Nicholas Rescher, Joe Camp, Lucy Fischer, and Uwe Stender.

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John Clendaniel has had a large part to play in the process that has resulted in this work. He read countless drafts, gave a wealth of thoughtful feedback, and we spent many hours in conversation with one another. This dissertation is a work that is deeply personal in the sense that it represents some of my most important convictions as well as countless hours of difficult contemplation, writing, and research; I also think it is a work that I was uniquely positioned to produce. At the same time, it could not have been the same without the efforts of John who encouraged me to be at my very best. John is not only my key philosophical interlocutor, but he is also my husband, and shows me an astonishing level of love and support.

I know I am incredibly lucky that, at the University of Pittsburgh, I studied philosophy with peers who are brilliant, kind, and supportive. I have learned a great deal from them and always felt that my fellow graduate students were cheering me on. One of the things I am most glad of about my experience at Pitt is that it was there that I met Jennifer Frey, an amazing woman with whom I have shared a really fun and rewarding friendship. Somehow, amidst her many projects and responsibilities, she finds the time to listen, to commiserate, to laugh at the absurd, and to give counsel. My experience of graduate school would have been far poorer without her.

I am in the enviable position of having friends too numerous to name, who have all supported and encouraged me in different ways and who are like family to me. I would like to thank them. I would like to thank my parents, Andrea Beaumonte and Walton Wills, who taught me early on the value of education and of thinking creatively, and who pushed and fought for me to have the educational opportunities that have made my current accomplishments possible. And I would like to thank my professors at Princeton University, where I did my undergraduate work in philosophy. They have been a huge influence on me and the way I approach philosophy. In

moments of doubt, I remember that they believed in me. I would especially like to thank Gideon Rosen, who advised my senior thesis at Princeton.

The University of Rochester, under the auspices of the Northeast Consortium for Faculty Diversity, provided me with financial support, office space, library access, and other forms of material support for my research, as well as allowing me to benefit from the camaraderie and depth of philosophical knowledge among the faculty in its Department of Philosophy. I would like to thank Randall Curren, chair of the University of Rochester's Department of Philosophy, and all of the faculty there for their hospitality and continued encouragement and kindness. JoAnn Moody is Director of the Northeast Consortium for Faculty Diversity and I greatly appreciate her work in organizing this program. I am also grateful for the support I received from the J. William Fulbright U.S. Student Program, which allowed me to spend a year in Berlin with access to German libraries and archives. To complete this project without these forms of support would have been many times more difficult.

The Society of Young Black Philosophers has provided me with encouragement and community, and I am very grateful to its members. I would like to express my thanks to the Collegium of Black Women Philosophers and to its founder, Kathryn Gines. Before learning of and then joining the CBWP, I had heard of a few Black woman philosophers besides myself, and I knew they existed, somewhere, but I had never met one. So it is really wonderful to have this network of women to share the joys and challenges of academic philosophy with.

Perhaps above all, I would like to thank Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, who left behind such a rich and wide-ranging body of work to explore, to comprehend, to develop further, and to attempt to put into practice. They have given us methods and ideas that make it more possible not only to understand the world, but also to change it for the better.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I aim to provide a clear elucidation and critical analysis of Karl Marx's moral thought as it developed over the course of his writings, beginning with his doctoral dissertation in 1840, and ending with *Capital*, which Marx was in the process of preparing for publication up until his death in 1883. I argue for three closely related claims: first, that the theory Marx developed in his work does have a distinct moral content (and that Marx's moral critiques of class society and rival moral theories are consciously moral, not merely unwittingly so, as some have argued¹); second, I argue that Marx's conception of morality is based in his conception of essential human nature and of human beings as social and natural beings who produce their own existence through labor; third, I hope to show that Marx's approach to morality is both plausible and defensible. I believe that Marx's attempt to develop a moral naturalism set upon a scientific basis should remain appealing for us today. In the light of unfolding political, social, economic and ecological crisis, I think the time is ripe for a thorough and systematic analysis of Marx's moral critique of class society, and moral argument for a society consciously oriented toward the satisfaction of human needs and development of human powers. This is what I have attempted to do here.

¹ Norman Geras has argued in his paper, "The Controversy About Marx and Justice" that Marx thought capitalism was unjust, but did not think that he thought capitalism was unjust. Terence Irwin also makes a similar claim in the treatment of Marx that appears in his three-volume *The Development of Ethics*.

I address Marx's moral thought as it develops chronologically, and within the three time periods into which I have sorted Marx's writings, I investigate a few principal themes. In the first chapter, I treat his works between 1840 and 1847. The second chapter picks up in 1847 and concerns his works from then until 1857, and in the third chapter, I discuss Marx's writings between 1858 and 1883. I treat these writings as parts of one unified and developing whole, and trace the development of themes such as individuality, alienation, rights, and freedom throughout these works. In separating Marx's works into these three chronological sections, I do not mean to imply that Marx's theoretical development undergoes the sort of “breaks” or “ruptures” which interpreters such as French Marxist Louis Althusser have seen in Marx's writings². Rather, I argue³ that there is a large amount of continuity between Marx's early works, such as *The Holy Family* or the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and his later ones such as *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*.

I also disagree with interpreters such as Daniel Brudney who argue that Marx tried, but failed³, to abandon philosophy around the time of the writing of *The German Ideology*⁴. I argue

² Nicholas Churchich, in his 1994 book, *Marxism and Morality: A Critical Examination of Marxist Ethics*, is a more recent interpreter who argues that “There can hardly be any doubt that there is, in fact, a definite break in the development of Marx's ideas” (Churchich, *Marxism and Morality*, p.31). I do very much doubt this, and one of the main goals of this dissertation is to show that there is significantly more continuity in Marx's thought than commentators such as Churchich, Althusser, and others suppose.

³ Well, I also disagree with interpreters such as Lawrence J. and John T. Jost, who argue in the 2007 paper, “Why Marx Left Philosophy for Social Science,” that Marx tried and succeeded.

⁴ For a clear and interesting response to Brudney's way of reading Marx, see Ruth Abbey's 2002 paper, “Young Karl Does Headstands: A Reply to Daniel Brudney.” (It is a response to Brudney's 2001 paper, “Justifying a Conception of The Good Life: The Problem of the 1844 Marx.”) In her reply, Abbey concludes: “Brudney contends that under the influence of Feuerbach, Marx eschewed traditional philosophical forms of justification: he shared Feuerbach's 'antipathy to philosophical theory'. Yet Marx followed many a Western philosopher in posing the question of what was distinctive about human beings and using the answer to inform a conception of the good life. He defended his conception of the good life by reference to uniquely human potential: communism would make the good life attainable would allow people to express and live in accordance with their distinctively human powers. Essence and existence would coincide. Brudney's unwillingness to deem this approach 'philosophical' seems to betray an unduly restrictive conception of philosophy” (Abbey 2002, p.154).

that when we look at Marx's works, what we find is a sustained and conscious interest in philosophical questions, and that Marx's ability to provide answers for these questions only grows as he deepens his engagement with economic themes. I think one of the most striking examples of this sustained philosophical engagement is Marx's discussion of alienation in his early works such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and then later in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Similarly, a comparison of Marx's critiques of Utilitarianism in *The German Ideology* and in *Capital* provides one very useful and interesting point of reference to understand how his ability to diagnose the faults of various moral theories sharpens and becomes more concrete as Marx develops his understanding of capitalism as an economic system. In the later treatment, Marx is able to criticize Utilitarianism not just on the grounds that it is hypocritical or that it proceeds from false views about human nature; he argues that even the more sophisticated Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill is fatally flawed because it is Utopian and unrealistic about the possibility for goods to be distributed in a different way on the economic basis of capitalist production.

Brudney's response to Abbey, which he gives in the 2002 paper, "Justification and Radicalism in the 1844 Marx: A Response to Professor Abbey," is, I think, not especially successful, because he falls back upon a reading of Marx which is highly suspect: namely, that Marx justified his claims about the good life for human beings by reference to what those who occupy the standpoint of workers in a fully developed communist society would recognize as good. Brudney writes, "I attribute to Marx the view that the proper justification for his account of the good life for human beings comes through a distinctive activity, namely, the practical daily activity of workers in a true communist society: to be such a worker engaged in such activity is the proper way to see the truth of Marx's claims, to see that his claims are true. I argue, however, that Marx's invocation, for justificatory purposes, of a standpoint on the far side of social revolution raises a justificatory problem for those of us on the near side" (Brudney 2002, p.156).

I just can't see how to square any of this with Marx's own insistence that he develops his claims about what is best for human beings by proceeding from *existing* human beings, not possible future ones. Throughout this Introduction I attempt to explain what I take Marx's method to be, and if I am successful in doing that, then I think it will become quite clear why we ought not to accept Brudney's reading of Marx, at least not on this score.

In producing this study, I have focused first and foremost on maintaining a direct and close engagement with Marx's texts. I cite a wide range of his writings, including economic works such as *Capital* and polemics such as the "Circular Against Kriege," as well as letters and newspaper articles that Marx wrote throughout his life. I think that when we take all of these writings together, a clear and compelling picture of Marx's moral thought and the relation in his thought between morality and human nature, and between morality and materialism, emerges. One of the things that I believe becomes most clear in the systematic, chronological treatment of Marx's moral thought which I have produced is that throughout the entire body of his work, Marx retains his conviction that "man is the highest being for man," and argues that the production of "rich individuals," individuals for whom the exercise, development, and expansion of their powers is their greatest need, is the highest aim for human beings. This is an aim, he argues, that can only be realized in a society in which human beings and their flourishing constitute the highest ruling principle, and in which society's resources and productive capacities are rationally and democratically controlled by the mass of society, and directed toward the satisfaction of human needs and the development of human powers.

In the remaining balance of this Introduction, I take the opportunity to describe Marx's moral conception in relatively broad strokes. I begin by discussing Marx's claim that "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263). I explore how morality, for Marx, is based in a correct understanding of human nature and, specifically, an understanding of humans as both natural and social beings who transform their environment and themselves through the labor process. I then go on to describe Marx's

methodological materialism. Like any other human product, morality is a thoroughly historical phenomenon, and I explain how this is the case, as well as how it is that morality is both historical *and* objective and universally binding. Over the course of the dissertation, each of these issues will be examined in greater detail, but I hope in this Introduction to provide a broad theoretical context in which to conceptualize that detail.

Marx's materialism: what it does (and does not) mean to say that “being determines consciousness.”

Marx emphasizes throughout his work⁵ the thesis that it is being, that is, the concrete lived existence of human beings engaged in social production, that plays the fundamental role in determining human consciousness. This claim about the ontological priority of matter over ideas informs Marx's approach to understanding the development of morality in human history, providing justification for the methodological materialism he espouses and employs. While, like Hegel before him, Marx recognizes a dialectical interrelation between the material and the ideal and between the abstract and the concrete, Marx's method is always to begin with concrete, determinate being in order to achieve the most penetrating analysis of reality. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and his collaborator Frederick Engels write:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material

⁵ Especially in *The German Ideology* and in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (MECW 4:53, MECW 4:138, MECW 29:263)

production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness. (MECW 5:36)

In accusing German philosophy of “descending from heaven to earth,” Marx criticizes a method that, he thinks, accepts human beings' self-conceptions too uncritically as a basis for theory, as though it were possible to deduce from ideas alone the real conditions of human existence. Ideological forms of thought such as morality are products of human activity⁶ which, thinks Marx, cannot be fully or properly understood without a correct appreciation of their basis in particular economic, social, and historical circumstances.

Marx's method is materialist, in the sense that he begins with the concrete and determinate, and historical in the sense that he approaches human existence as a dynamic and developing process. Marx has this to say about historical materialism in *The German Ideology*:

This method of approach is not devoid of premises. It starts out from the real premises and does not abandon them for a moment. Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions. As soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists.

The method of historical materialism proceeds from the understanding that, as Marx puts it in the opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Luis Bonaparte*, “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past”

⁶ We see that Marx would reject for instance the thesis of moral realism if it implies that moral qualities and moral facts have an independent existence or moral bindingness that is independent of human practice. The notion of morality as a subject matter having to do with ahistorical abstractions would violate the central claim being made in this section of *The German Ideology*, which is that morality, like other ideological forms, is a thoroughly human product.

(MECW 11:103). Human beings are active, purposive, and self-directed—yet it is important to keep in mind that the external world, and the course of history leading up to the moment in which they act, has a part to play in determining that activity, activity which includes intellectual production such as the construction of moral theories.

I wish to emphasize that historical materialism is not a one-sided economic or technological determinism^{7,8}. Material circumstances play a fundamentally determining role in shaping ideas as human beings attempt to reflect in thought the world around them. However, when humans produce those reflections of the world, they go on to act in ways that are informed by the ideas they hold. While Marx stresses the fundamental role of the external world and of material circumstances in determining consciousness, he also points out that in changing their circumstances, human beings also produce the basis for further intellectual development. Human beings, interacting with their environment through the labor process, transform their own existence and thereby also transform their consciousness⁹. That consciousness in turn does not

⁷ Friend and foe alike have construed Marxism as more deterministic than I think is quite accurate. Karl Kautsky, in his 1906 book, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History*, provides many useful insights into Marx's moral thought. Yet at the end of the book, Kautsky takes an almost fatalist turn, insisting that communism is inevitable. He writes there as a friend of Marx, of course; the foes are too numerous to list.

⁸ The thesis that historical materialism is a form of technological determinism was advanced by G. A. Cohen in his influential book, *Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, and the school of Analytical Marxism occupied itself in large part with the task of formulating a non-dialectical Marxism. For Cohen, this meant a technological determinism and a brand of functionalism in which historical phenomena arose precisely because they fulfilled a function within the capitalist system. For Jon Elster, another influential member of this school, Marxism was best constructed along the lines of methodological individualism. While it is of course important to note that individuals play important roles as historical agents, I think Elster's methodological individualism, which was supposed to capture everything worthwhile in Marx's theory of history, cannot adequately capture the extent to which human beings are in fact shaped and determined by factors beyond their control, and that these factors often do make it most appropriate to speak of collective actors such as economic classes, or the fact that human individuality itself, if it is not supposed to just amount to the fact that the human species is comprised of members that are numerically distinct from one another, is a historically emergent phenomenon whose emergence is not best explained by the fact of human individuality itself, but by appeal to facts about the nature of the human species and the conditions in which it has developed.

⁹ And so Marx writes, in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, that theory, too, becomes a

have a validity that can be evaluated in isolation from the circumstances in which it arises and that it is consciousness of.

As humans intervene into the material world on the basis of ideas, their ideas also play a role in determining the development of material conditions. Thus there is a dialectical interplay and unity between ideas and matter in which matter plays the fundamental part in determining the development of this unity, but not the sole part¹⁰. The point is doubly important in the context of a study of Marx's moral thought because there is the unfortunate tendency to regard any thoroughgoing materialism as boiling down in the end to crude determinism, and as therefore inhospitable to morality. Treatments of Marx's moral thought have sometimes been guilty of this mistake, taking the form of the opposition of the young, ethically-minded, “humanist” Marx to the mature, “scientific” (in this case, read: crudely determinist) Marx who describes the inexorable march of economic forces which drag human history along in their wake¹¹.

Over the course of this dissertation, I will explain in detail my reasons for thinking that it is a mistake to think that it immediately follows from the fact that Marx identified morality as a form of ideology, that morality according to him is therefore always false, illusory, or

material force, once it has gripped the masses (MECW 3:182).

¹⁰ Insofar as Analytical Marxism has sought to reconstruct Marxism without dialectics or at least, without dialectics as Marx construed it, I believe that it deprives itself of precisely that feature of his theory that has the most explanatory power. Interestingly enough, G. A. Cohen, who puts forward an alternative dialectic in *History, Labour, and Freedom*, seems to agree, as he writes: “I do not affirm any dialectical laws. Processes displaying the required structure count as dialectical whether or not their stages *generate* one another: it is enough that they *follow* one another, for whatever reason. In seeing dialectic in a process, we discern its contour in an intellectually satisfying manner, but the explanation of why it unfolds as it does is not thereby disclosed to us” (Cohen, *History, Labour, and Freedom*, p. 185).

¹¹ I am thinking here, of course, of the very influential work of Louis Althusser, especially in his book, *For Marx*. Louis Althusser, Ben Brewster (tr.) *For Marx*, Verso, 1969

misleading¹². For the time being, I will simply briefly state that Marx's intention in describing morality as a form of ideology is not to thereby criticize or defame it, but rather to insist that like religion or metaphysics, morality is a thoroughly historical phenomenon produced by human beings and its validity depends on how well it reflects a reality that can be investigated empirically, and how well it follows from its "real premises". With regard to morality, those real premises are the human beings themselves, their activity and the conditions for their flourishing. In asking whether an action, state of affairs, or principle is moral or not, we do not need to retreat into abstract speculation. Rather, it is possible to determine empirically whether or not a thing is moral or immoral by evaluating whether it is such as to promote or to inhibit the development of human beings. Later in this introduction, I will explore in greater detail what it means to say that morality is thoroughly historical and yet also thoroughly binding and objective. But I would like to proceed immediately to a discussion of how morality relates to human nature.

Labor, human nature, and the relation between natural and social being in Marx's thought.

In keeping with Marx's methodological materialism, his moral outlook is derived in the first place from an assessment of what human beings are¹³ and what, given their nature, is beneficial to their flourishing. It must be stated at the outset that Marx does not believe that is possible to determine morality based merely on humans' *biological* being and *biological* needs, and when I

¹² Some commentators, like Kai Nielsen in his 1985 paper, "If Historical Materialism is True Does Morality Totter?" argue that the success of an argument aiming to show that Marx endorsed some moral claims depends on showing that it is possible for some moral claims to be non-ideological. I take a different tack because, as I will argue over the course of this dissertation, I do not think that ideology is a purely reactionary or illusory phenomenon, in any case. Ideology can have a revolutionary and progressive content.

¹³ For a very interesting and useful treatment of the similarities between the moral naturalism of Marx and that of Aristotle, as well as of the important differences between them, see George McCarthy's 1986 paper, "German Social Ethics and the Return to Greek Philosophy: Marx and Aristotle".

say that Marx's moral theory takes human nature as its starting point, I certainly do not mean to reduce human nature to the merely biological facts about members of the species *Homo sapiens*. Such a biologism would conceive of human nature and of human needs too narrowly and too statically. It would not account for the ways in which human beings continually transform their conditions of existence by altering their material production and thereby their own consciousness, as well as their nature and their needs. However, neither would it be right to say that the biological nature of *Homo sapiens* is irrelevant to morality. Social being—human existence as it has been produced and transformed historically through the activity of human beings¹⁴—and natural, biological being form two moments of a dialectical unity of human nature in which natural being plays a fundamental and ontologically prior part.

Humans are natural beings in the sense that they are biological beings of a certain sort. In particular, they are mammals, with a particular anatomy, particular metabolic processes, and a particular history of evolutionary development that has led to their emergence as a species. As natural beings, humans require such basic materials as food, water, shelter, a breathable atmosphere within certain parameters of chemical make-up, etc., in order for their biological processes to continue and for the species to survive. And insofar as human beings require food,

¹⁴ In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes:

The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what manner and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a "productive force." Further, that the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence, that the "history of humanity" must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:43).

water, and the like, human beings are, in a very restricted sense, indistinct from animals. But, as Marx writes:

Men themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:31).

Marx argues that the essence of human existence is the labor process, in which human beings intervene consciously and purposively into the natural world and the processes unfolding within it, as well as intervening into their own relationship to nature and into their own relationships to other human beings. In *Capital*, Marx describes the labor-process in the following way:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. [...] We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own. (*Capital*, MECW 35:188)

Unlike animals, which engage in their animal behaviors unconsciously and instinctively, human beings are what Marx calls “species-beings.” They possess and operate under a conception of themselves as a species. Humans can understand what necessary conditions must be fulfilled in order for their species to survive and, more than that, to thrive and to realize its capacities. More than this, human beings can also produce in accordance with the standards of any other species. They are able to understand the needs of another species and provide for that species accordingly, in such a way as to promote and direct the processes of nutrition, growth, and

reproduction that occur within it. Humans can also produce in accordance with abstractions such as beauty (as when they produce art). Marx explains the difference between animal activity and human activity thus:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity; it is that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. *Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being*¹⁵. (“Estranged Labour,” MECW 3:276)

Human nature is not a ghostly *something* that exists in the heart of every man or that “stands behind” the myriad appearances of human existence. Rather, it is what is common to the wide range of appearances that human activity can take on. Hence, Marx can write that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations” (*Theses on Feuerbach*, MECW 5:7). In order to determine the essence of human existence, Marx assesses a concrete totality of determinate instances of human activity and social relations, analyzing them to determine what is common to each of those instances.

Human nature is, according to Marx, that complex of human activity taken as a whole. It is therefore dynamic, constantly developing and being transformed as human beings act and produce in different ways¹⁶. As Marx writes in *Capital*, in “acting on the external world and changing it, [man] at the same time changes his own nature.” Out of this concrete totality of human activities and social relations, it is possible to develop an abstraction which is valid for

¹⁵ Emphasis mine.

¹⁶ For a recent book-length treatment of the concept of human nature in Marx's thought, see Sean Sayers' 1998 book, *Marxism and Human Nature*. Of possible further interest is Terry Eagleton's reply to Sayers' book, “Self-Realization, Ethics and Socialism.” Eagleton argues against Sayers that it is unsatisfactory to suggest that human nature is the totality of human activity. However, Marx does make an abstraction, the labor process, out of this concrete totality of appearances, as I argue here.

each of these concrete appearances. That abstraction is the labor process as the conscious intervention of human beings into the world, setting causal processes into motion in order to realize ends that they first posit in thought. Marx argues that this teleological realizing of ends is the essence of human existence; it is what separates human beings from other forms of life¹⁷ and it is the basis out of which human existence develops in its diverse and dynamic appearance. The connection between this conception of human nature and the moral outlook Marx develops in his work is aptly stated by Alan G. Nasser who writes in his 1975 paper, “Marx's Ethical Anthropology”, that

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

That the capitalists' pursuit of their class interests prevents workers from exercising their human *ergon*¹⁸ is regarded by Marx as an *unethical* state of affairs. Indeed, what sort of condemnation other than *ethical* would be appropriate in this context, given Marx's adherence to a normative anthropology? For it has been the historical role of *ergon*-based anthropologies to support claims concerning what is ethically good and bad for men. [...] It has been suggested that “The slanted interest, charged language and acrid tone of *Capital* imply not moral indignation, but simply outrage at the conditions of exploitation”¹⁹. But such “outrage,” voiced in reference to an explicitly stated normative anthropology, and constituting a systematic network of commendations

¹⁷ In her 2002 paper, “Young Marx Does Headstands: A Reply to Daniel Brudney,” Ruth Abbey argues that Daniel Brudney is not sufficiently thorough in his presentation of Marx's conception of human nature. Abbey writes: “Brudney acknowledges that Marx had a conception of human essence: ‘Marx's thought is that human beings are most essentially creatures who interact with the material world’ (p. 373, cf. 375). He sees Marx as ‘claiming that an obvious fact—that we transform the material world- reveals what is essential to our nature’. These tenets are correct, but do not go far enough. The significant omission lies in Marx's concern with how people work and transform their world. Because animals also interact with and transform the material world to ensure survival, Brudney's depiction of what is essential to humans does not capture their species distinction” (Abbey 2002, p.151-2).

¹⁸ According to Nasser, the *ergon* argument, found initially in Aristotle, “presupposes the following three claims: 1) that it makes sense, and is correct, to say that nature endows man qua man with a special function to perform, 2) that this function can be ascertained by determining the kind of activity that distinguishes *homo sapiens* (or, in Marx's case, as we shall see, *homo faber*) from every other species, and 3) that such activity is (the moral) *good* for man” (Nasser 1975).

¹⁹ Here Nasser quotes Donald C. Hodges, “Marx's Ethics and Ethical Theory,” *The Socialist Register*, Ralph Miliband and John Saville, eds., 1964 (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964), p.231.

and condemnations, is precisely what counts in the Western philosophical tradition as *moral* indignation.

To this, I would only add emphasis to the fact that according to Marx, capitalists are also alienated from their essential human nature because their scope for action is limited and determined by economic laws that operate beyond their control, even though those laws are themselves produced by human activity and social relations.

What it means to say that morality is determined by human nature.

Whenever Marx evaluates the moral status of an economic formation, a political system, the role of a group or collective, or the specific actions of one individual person, he does so within the context of this more abstract and universal conception of human social existence (which is in turn based on the concrete totality of human social being)²⁰. Throughout this dissertation, I emphasize the fact that in determining what is morally required in a specific historical situation, Marx asks whether or not the action, principle, political movement, etc. in question is such as to promote or to inhibit the expansion of human powers and the satisfaction of human needs. Put differently, in order to know the moral status of a thing, one must know whether or not it is such as to help human beings to realize their nature as natural and social beings who satisfy their needs and transform their existence consciously through the labor process. However, this is no mean feat. I do not intend to make it sound obvious or apparent, simply from a knowledge of this abstraction of human essence, which human actions will fit the bill.

²⁰ It will be seen that this reading of Marx puts me into stark disagreement with Allen Wood, who writes in his 1972 “Marx’s Critical Anthropology” that “Marx seems [...] to acknowledge no concept of man which could serve as a standard against which his present existence could be measured and criticized.”

I believe it is a virtue of Marx's theory that his conception of human nature is quite thin. He does not think that human beings are essentially selfish, essentially altruistic, essentially competitive, fallen, vicious, or any other of a whole host of characterizations that other theories have attributed to essential human nature. But then it is fair to ask, Now that one has ascended “from earth to heaven,” as Marx puts it in *The German Ideology*, and abstracted a human essence out of a concrete totality of determinate appearances, how do we get back down again?

The move downward is mediated by different levels of abstraction between essential human nature that is universal to all human beings and a particular, concrete historical situation and the agents who are in it²¹. We approach historical questions proceeding from the fact that human beings are always at least indirectly producing their own conditions of existence when they produce in order to satisfy their needs²². However, that is quite general. This human production can take on a variety of forms, and so in evaluating a concrete historical situation it is not enough to know merely that human beings produce their existence through the labor process. Although of course no human being acts in conditions of absolute knowledge, in seeking to determine what is morally right or wrong in a given situation, we must gather as much information as possible regarding moments of the concrete totality of social existence in which one acts. In short, a scientific materialist knowledge of human social existence is a prerequisite for accurate normative judgements. Here is a non-exhaustive description of some of the most

²¹ The method I describe here is not explicitly laid out by Marx in the way that I have spelled it out. However, one instance in which he is clearly applying this method is in *The German Ideology*. Marx writes that “the first premise of all human history is, of course, the existence of living human individuals” (MECW 5:31). He then goes on to a series of concrete determinations: how human beings produce to maintain their existence and how they relate to nature, their division of labor, the emergence of exchange, the development of nations and the productive forces of those nations, and so on.

²² In *The German Ideology*, Marx cautions that this might not be the case for the earliest human beings.

important aspects of reality which we must investigate in order to determine what is morally required at a particular historical moment.

In addition to knowing that human beings produce their existence, we must also determine how that production is carried out. We must know what the mode of production of a given society is, whether there is a division of labor and if so, how labor is divided, and furthermore, at what stage of development a society is within that mode of production. This is an empirical question about the economic organization of a society. To answer it, we have to investigate such matters as who is taking part in production, and whether society is still at the stage of consuming what is found ready in nature, as in a hunter-gatherer society, or human beings are actively intervening into nature to direct its processes, as in an agricultural society, or whether production has become rationalized and socialized, and its efficiency increased, to the massive extent that it has in industrial production. We need to examine how goods are distributed once they are produced, and whether a surplus is created and if so, how large a surplus and who controls it.

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

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

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

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

The investigation into each of these questions, according to Marx, will proceed from an understanding that each of these aspects of social being have arisen out of a long process of human beings producing their own existence through their active adaptation to the world in which they live. However, in order to derive specific, concrete moral claims out of this abstract and general principle, we must understand the particular manner in which this essence is realized, and also the manner in which it is distorted, frustrated, or limited, in the various historical formations that have arisen during this process. It may sound as though it is an awfully tall order, to need to know so much about the historical context in which an agent acts. But the point is that in order to say with a high degree of accuracy what is morally required in a given historical situation, we need to know as much of this context as possible *and* we need to understand it in a manner informed by categories such as class and mode of production, so that we can understand how all the parts of this totality interact with one another and form a developing whole into which human beings can consciously and rationally intervene. With regard to morality, what it means to say, as Marx does, that “When reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:37), is to say that we cannot make accurate moral claims without investigating the concrete historical situation as thoroughly and systematically as possible. Philosophy continues to exist as part of our knowledge, but there is no longer a hard and fast

border between philosophical knowledge and the scientific knowledge of society and nature²³. The question, What is to be done? is answered by determining what, in a particular situation, is most likely to promote the realization of human nature, and this is something that can be determined empirically via the method I have sketched here.

Throughout this dissertation but especially in the third chapter, where I discuss Marx's moral thought as it develops between the years 1858 and 1883, I argue that Marx puts forward a moral argument for communism. But while Marx does think that in the present historical moment, human beings ought to work to promote communism, this does not entail that at all historical times, the promotion of communism has been the morally right activity for humans to engage in. As I have tried to stress, what is moral at a given point in time depends on a whole range of determinate factors. To make such a suggestion would be to illegitimately abstract from the specific historical circumstances which make communism possible at a certain stage in the development of capitalist production. As Marx argues, to call for communism at a time when it is not yet possible to achieve, or even to call for communism at a time when it might be achieved, but to propose means such as *mere* moral persuasion, which are unequal to the task of actually realizing a communist society, is hopelessly utopian. In order to draw the conclusion that human beings ought to promote communism, Marx does not abstractly imagine what ideal future society would best suit human beings as he imagines them to be. He examines how the alienation of humans from their essence leads to a debased, limited existence for human beings and even threatens their continued existence, full stop. He examines the economic tendencies already

²³ And so I wholly disagree with Philip J. Kain who in his 1984 paper, "Marx and the Abolition of Morality," argues that according to Marx, "Only science can be justified, not morality. Moral judgments cannot be empirically verified and they are not true or false."

existing within capitalism that are leading to a greater rationalization and socialization of human production, and provide the basis for greater conscious control of human beings over their own powers. He looks to the existing workers' movement and its political and economic aims, and how the achievement of its aims would affect the entire society of which it is a part. Communism, as Marx tells us, is not an “ideal to realize,” but a real, existing movement within capitalist society, and a movement which Marx believes human beings can and should work to promote.

Adopting Marx's moral conception, it is possible to make moral judgements not just about what a class or society as a whole ought to do, but also about individual agents and their actions. Again, in evaluating the actions of a particular individual agent, in order to answer the question of what this person ought or ought not to do, we have to understand the relevant historical context. We need to know what paths for action are actually open to her, and how her individual actions are likely to make an impact on the historical situation in which she acts. The greater the historical import and the greater the potential of her action to either promote or inhibit the realization of human nature, the greater the moral significance of her action. Early in his career, Marx writes that for human beings there is an imperative “To overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being” (*Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, MECW 3:182). Within human social arrangements that continue to allow for and even to promote the domination of things over people and of man over man, it is always possible to ask what can be done to do away with this debasement, and how a particular action relates to the struggle to overthrow it. The answer to the question of how a person should act is determined by assessing empirically the conditions in which she acts and the potential of her action to promote

the further realization of essential human nature, an abstraction that is itself determined empirically by assessing a concrete totality of human history and existing social relations. In this sense, Marx's method for determining what is moral or immoral at a given historical moment is a scientific method.

Human nature and human needs.

The satisfaction of human needs is an important part of Marx's moral conception, and those needs, according to Marx, develop and expand as human powers and the sophistication of their social production increases. Marx regularly invites his reader to keep in mind that the prerequisite for any more complex or sophisticated form of social existence is that humans' basic natural needs for food, water, shelter, etc., be satisfied. But as social beings, humans have not only their strictly biological needs, but also needs that come about as a result of humans' attempts to satisfy their biological needs and the complex of needs that arise historically out of that initial pursuit. In producing according to their existing needs, human beings not only satisfy those needs, but they also create new needs which in turn have new requirements for their fulfillment, setting the process into further motion as human beings then develop new forms of production in order to meet those new needs. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx refers to these needs, “historic needs—needs created by production itself,” “needs which are themselves the offspring of social production and intercourse,” as “social needs”. Social needs, the “needs created by production itself,” have their basis in the natural needs towards which production was historically first directed and which must still at present continually be satisfied. As Marx writes in *The German Ideology*,

The first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history, [is that humans] must be in a position to live in order to be able to "make history". But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life²⁴.

And since those natural needs for food, drink, shelter, etc. are directly determined by the characteristics of humans as natural beings, it is right to say that human biological being plays a fundamental role in determining the development of social needs. However, it is not the case that social needs are in any way simply reducible to natural needs, and it would also be foreign to Marx to regard natural needs as the "real needs," and the social, historically arisen needs, as somehow less genuine. Marx provides a specific example of how basic, biological needs give rise to increasingly *social* needs in his discussion of a group of French workers, whose need for higher wages in order to ensure continued access to food and housing gives rise, in the struggle against their bosses, to a need for solidarity with fellow workers. This socially produced need is no less a genuine need for human beings than is the biological need for food²⁵.

²⁴ The passage continues, and it is worth quoting at some length:

"The second point is that the satisfaction of the first need (the action of satisfying, and the instrument of satisfaction which has been acquired) leads to new needs; and this production of new needs is the first historical act. [...]"

The third circumstance which, from the very outset, enters into historical development, is that men, who daily remake their own life, begin to make other men, to propagate their kind: the relation between man and woman, parents and children, the family. The family, which to begin with is the only social relationship, becomes later, when increased needs create new social relations and the increased population new needs, a subordinate one (except in Germany), and must then be treated and analysed according to the existing empirical data, not according to "the concept of the family," as is the custom in Germany. These three aspects of social activity are not of course to be taken as three different stages, but just as three aspects or, to make it clear to the Germans, three "moments," which have existed simultaneously since the dawn of history and the first men, and which still assert themselves in history today. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:42)

²⁵ From *Human Requirements and the Division of Labour*, "When communist *artisans* associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring them together. Association, society and

Human beings' alienation from their essence under capitalism, and the moral argument for communism.

Marx writes that the significance of communism as a goal for human beings is that it will realize “a new manifestation of the forces of human nature and a new enrichment of human nature” (“Human Requirements and the Division of Labour,” MECW 3:306), thereby laying the material basis for the realization and development of existing capacities and the appearance of new ones, and corresponding needs. Under capitalism, Marx argues, human beings are so separated from the natural world and from their own species-being (their own particularly human mode of interaction with the natural world, i.e. the labor process and interaction with its products) that their needs as human beings in fact are limited to bare subsistence—or even somewhat less. This is the case because under capitalism a person's needs have no effective capacity to be fulfilled unless the person has money to fulfill the need. For workers, particularly, their needs are reduced to just those needs that must be fulfilled in order for their work to be done. As Marx writes, “It is not only that man has no human needs—even his animal needs cease to exist” (MECW 3:308). A central element of Marx's opposition to capitalism is that it limits the development of human beings by inhibiting the fulfillment of human needs. Worse, in limiting the development of humans and new human capacities, it also limits the range of human needs to the barest essentials. Capitalism bars humans from the kind of relationship to the natural world and the

conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies.”

products of their labor that would create more sophisticated forms of human interaction with their environment, and therefore, corresponding new needs, as well.

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

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

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

The solution to this disruption, Marx thinks, is to bring the appearance of social being into accordance with its essence. This means that production must be brought under the rational, conscious control of human beings. And for that to occur, without regularities in human production taking on the appearance of social laws, social production must be coordinated socially, and directed not towards profit, but towards the creation of a society in which the free development of each is the precondition of the free development of all. What I am describing

here is in Marx's thought the transition from capitalism, to the transitional stages of socialism, and eventually, to fully developed communist society. It is important not to interpret Marx's vision of this future society, in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all,” as some Marxian “end of history.” Instead, Marx argues that class society constitutes the pre-history of the human species, and that only with humanity's rational control over its own powers and over the natural world of which human beings are a part, can an actually *human* history begin to unfold. Marx refers to this in the *Critique of Political Economy* when he writes:

The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation. (MECW 29:264)

With the resolution of this antagonism, the material basis for moral theory as a way to theorize the gap between human existence as it is and human existence as it ought to be, will also disappear. This is a thesis that I return to at several points throughout the dissertation.

In addition to analyzing other moral theories, Marx, over the course of his writings, develops a moral philosophy based on human beings “in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions,” and the requirements that must be satisfied in order to bring about the circumstances in which we might see what Marx calls the “all-sided development” of “rich individuality”²⁶. Marx examines the goals of such important struggles as the French Revolution and the workers' movement, and considers how they represent the highest

²⁶ For an interesting and recent treatment of the concept of “rich individuality” in Marx, see Michael Lebowitz, *The Socialist Alternative: Real Human Development*, Monthly Review Press, 2010.

consciousness about what is necessary in order for human beings to preserve the historical gains of class societies and to move closer toward an “all-sided development.” Based on his understanding of these struggles, their aims, and their historical role, together with his complex understanding of human nature, Marx draws the conclusion that man is the highest being for man, and that human development itself is therefore the most important goal for human beings. In his criticisms of other moral theories and of existing class society, his standard becomes: the continued existence of humanity, the preservation of its cultural heritage in its diversity and achievements, and the promotion of “rich individuality” and an “all-sided development” of human needs and capacities. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx asserts the desirability of:

the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one. (MECW 15:251)

Marx argues that one of the aims of human social existence is for human beings to bring increasingly more of the natural world and more of their own social relations under their conscious, rational control. That ability of human beings to extend greater control over themselves and over the natural world is a key aspect of bringing about their “all-sided development”. The extent to which labor is carried out as a mere means to life or as life-activity itself is another key aspect of the all-sided development of human beings. In alienated labor, the essence of man's social being, labor, is converted into a mere means for the maintenance of his continued existence as a biological being with merely natural needs. The extent to which those natural needs, such as, say, the need to eat, have been transformed into social, historically arisen needs, is a further marker of the extent to which this all-sided development has taken place. For instance, for primitive man, the need to eat may have had the appearance of a need for raw flesh.

Today, after centuries of social development, it is the need for adequate access to affordable grocery items and the tools to carry out appropriate culinary preparation. Here, we can say that a “historically created need has taken the place of a natural one”.

When Marx refers to the “rich individuality” that could first be developed in communist society, he refers to the human being in whom human essence has been brought into accordance with human appearance. Instead of appearing as a debased, limited creature, hampered and controlled by economic laws, the human both is, essentially, a social being with a capacity for unlimited development through the labor process, and actually appears to be so in a society in which the natural world and the social sphere have been brought under man's conscious and rational control, and directed on the basis of human needs. (The existence of human persons as individuated beings at all, is itself the result of social production, a point Marx makes when he says that man “is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society”²⁷. Only at a certain stage in the development of production can human beings emerge as individuals and not merely as “herd animals”²⁸, pursuing goals and interests that are not narrowly subordinated to the struggle for survival.)

Dynamism and processual development are key elements of essential human nature—a part of human nature that is stunted in a society that does not allow human beings to satisfy their full range of needs and to develop an unfolding array of human powers in the natural world. Marx's call for the abolition of human beings' alienation from essential human nature and more

²⁷ *Der Mensch ist ein Thier, das nur in der Gesellschaft sich vereinzeln kann.* (English: MECW 28:18, German MEW 13:616)

²⁸ Marx writes, “Man becomes individualized only through the process of history. Originally he is a *species being*, a *tribal being*, a *herd animal*—though by no means a *zoon politikon* in the political sense. Exchange itself is a major agent of this individuation. It makes herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 15:420).

specifically, of human beings from the world they themselves have produced, is a call for labor to be carried out in accordance with human essence, as conscious, purposive activity that increases and develops man's command over the external world and over himself, and is directed towards the satisfaction of human needs and development of human powers. Such a reconciliation of essence and appearance, Marx argues, would usher in the beginning of truly human history.

Morality as objective, universal, and historical

Throughout this dissertation, I address Marx's criticisms of specific moralities, especially Christian morality, Kantian morality, and Utilitarianism. A large part of Marx's writings on morality is devoted to a treatment of the history of morality as it has developed in human societies. In carrying out that treatment, Marx examines how particular historical—specifically, social and economic—conditions have provided the basis for different manifestations of morality. Marx argues that not only is the content of morality historical, but also that morality itself is a product of human activity and has arisen in the course of human social development, and that it will be abolished at a time when the gap between society as it is and society as it ought to be has been closed, and human appearance has been brought into accordance with human essence. In a society already organized so as to promote the all-sided development of the human individual, the wish, expressed in various forms of morality, for human freedom and the brotherhood of man, would be realized in human social arrangements.

For Marx, ethics are derived in the first place from an understanding of what human beings are, but there is no reason to think that what human beings are is simply static or eternal. If that were the case, it would actually be very difficult to make sense of the charge of

ahistoricism that Marx levels against other moral theories. In fact it is precisely because human social being is constantly changing and developing, that the fact of the matter about what is good or bad for human beings at various historical stages changes and develops as well. For Marx, morality is essentially historical. It is historical in (at least) two important senses. The first is that the validity of specific moral commands and specific moral theories depends, not on some set of eternal moral truths, but rather on human social development and the question of which things will promote human development at a particular point in human history.

Morality is also historical in the sense that morality is a social product that has arisen at a particular stage in human history and, Marx predicts, will also pass away when the gap between human existence as it is and human existence as it ought to be is closed. In a fully developed communist society, Marx argues, the social contradictions which create the basis for morality and for other ideological forms of thought such as politics will be abolished. Not only are particular moral precepts contingent and historical, but morality as such is a historical and transitory phenomenon that can pass out of existence.

Marx does not think that what is moral in a given society at a given historical stage is simply whatever counts as moral according to the dominant moral theory of the time. Rather, an action, principle, state of affairs, or other object of moral judgement is morally good if it contributes to further human development and to the greater conscious control of human beings over their own existence (and morally bad if it inhibits these). In this way, morality for Marx accommodates both the fact that human beings have an essential nature as social beings who produce their own existence through labor, and the fact that this essence is expressed in different ways in different circumstances. Therefore, the fact of the matter about what promotes human

development, the expression of human essence, and the abolition of alienation, is different in different historical settings.

In his 1991 book, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, Cornel West argues that Marx did not take a scientific approach to morality or attempt to ground it in objective reality and in essential human nature, but instead developed what West calls a “radical historicism.” West reads Marx quite differently than I do, and claims that “The major difference between Marx and the Marxist philosophers regarding approaches to ethics is that Marx is not bothered by charges of moral relativism, whereas the philosophers are bothered by such charges”²⁹. He argues that for Marx, any form of justification, including moral justification, is not a matter of accounting for the truth of what one says, but rather, a “way of reminding ourselves and others which particular community or set of we-intentions we identify with.” West argues that Marx abandoned philosophy, and writes that:

The vision of philosophy as a quest for philosophic certainty and search for philosophic foundations is an ahistorical vision, a hapless attempt to escape from the flux of history by being philosophic, that is, by being bound to certainty, tied to necessity, or linked to universality³⁰.

I think that in clarifying Marx's opposition to morality conceived as a set of eternal moral commands, West emphasizes the historicism of Marx's moral conception, but in the process, unmoors Marx's moral theory from the theoretical basis which accounts for its validity and universal bindingness. We might go on making claims about what is or is not moral and whether it is or is not worth doing, but these would not be factive claims about what the world is like;

²⁹ Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, p.167.

³⁰ Ibid., p.3.

they would just be ways of reminding one another “which particular community or set of we-intentions” we identify with.

If a moral theory is incapable of making universal claims upon human beings, regardless of their cognitive states or subjective group identifications, then it hardly merits being called a moral theory at all. It would in that case be little more than a set of Club Rules. Marx, I argue, wants more than this. He insists time and again that revolutionary struggle and the achievement of a communist society would not merely be beneficial for workers, but rather that these things are necessary for the well-being and continued development of the human species taken as a whole. When members of the bourgeoisie choose, based on their understanding of history and of an ongoing social crisis, to side with the proletariat, they are not, according to Marx, simply trying a new set of “we-intentions” on for size. Rather, they are abandoning their narrow class interests because they have come to recognize their interests as human beings and to adopt the standpoint of the species as a whole. Marx looks to establish exactly the type of certainty and universality for his claims about communism, and about the role of workers' struggle in advancing the cause of humanity, that West rejects on his behalf.

I argue that Marx identifies the proletariat as a class that represents the interests of all humanity³¹. The proletariat, Marx argues, cannot realize its aims as a class without overthrowing

³¹ Others have argued that this is not the case. For instance, Allen Buchanan in his 1979 paper, “Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality,” argues that according to Marx, “In every revolution in the past, including the French, the revolutionary class, not being a majority, found it necessary to present its own special interests as universal rights in order to enlist the support of other classes. Granted Marx's assumption that the intermediate classes become 'proletarianized,' so that the proletariat becomes the vast majority, with only one class confronting it as its implacable foe, such ideological window-dressing is no longer necessary. The proletariat, like previous revolutionary classes, is motivated by its own interests; but unlike its predecessors, it can boldly acknowledge this fact” (Buchanan 1979, p. 61).

I read Marx quite differently. I think that for Marx, in the French Revolution, the bourgeoisie actually *did* represent the interests of all of humanity, as for humanity to progress, it was required that feudalism be overcome

the whole class society and system of private property of which it is a part, and it is precisely this that must be done in order for human beings' alienation from their essential nature to be abolished. With the abolition of alienation, according to Marx, humans will be able to fully realize their essence as natural and social beings who satisfy their needs, and transform themselves and their environment, through conscious, active adaptation to the world via the labor process. Marx argues that the working class in its current conditions of existence under capitalism prefigures communist society. Workers, he writes, have no stake in the capitalist system and have no particular interests that conflict with the rights of other classes because what they suffer is “no *particular wrong* but *wrong generally*” (*The Holy Family*, MECW 3:186). The moral condemnation of capitalist society made from the point of view of the proletariat has a universal validity for all human beings³².

In this Introduction, I have made a number of complex claims that demand further close elucidation and analysis. I hope my readers will find that in this dissertation, I have given these claims the attention they deserve. However, I am well aware that Marx's writings are rich, nuanced, and almost needless to say, the subject of vigorous debate in almost every detail. In the

and that capitalist production become the dominant mode of production of society. Similarly, I think that the establishment of bourgeois rights was a very progressive step, and not only for the bourgeoisie but also for the proletariat. However, while Marx thinks that the bourgeoisie's interests were at a certain point also the interests of humanity, that is no longer the case as it has become possible to move on to a higher stage of human social development. This is a transition that can only be carried out through the self-emancipation of the working class, and when they perform this historical act, they emancipate not only themselves, but also the rest of society, which is a point Marx makes very explicitly at the end of *The Holy Family*.

³² George Brenkert, in his 1977 paper, “Marx, Engels, and the Relativity of Morals,” argues that Marx did not theorize a universal morality. I think that like Cornel West, Brenkert rightly emphasizes the extent to which what is moral or immoral, according to Marx, can be different in different historical contexts, but does not place appropriate emphasis on the extent to which Marx's conception of human nature does provide a basis for moral objectivity and universality. Charles W. Mills' 1994 paper, “Marxism, 'Ideology', and Moral Objectivism,” is a recent attempt to defend the thesis that Marxism is compatible with the idea of an objective morality, and Mills rightly contends that Marx's main point of contention with moralists and Utopian socialists is that they think moral philosophy alone has a greater efficacy *vis a vis* social change than it actually does.

following chapters, I attempt to erode the basis for the most stubborn misconceptions regarding Marx's approach to morality, as well as to provide a clear and compelling picture of the continuity and development in that approach throughout Marx's writings. Although numerous authors have tackled the question of Marx's moral thought in both article- and book-length treatments, this particular project, such a detailed and sustained close analysis of Marx's moral thought throughout the entirety of his works, over the whole of his intellectual career, from a perspective that endorses Marx's method as he developed it, is at least as I understand it, rare in the Anglophone tradition. I believe that this project is an important contribution to philosophy and in particular, to moral philosophy and to the study of Marx's work.

2.0 MARX'S MORAL THOUGHT IN HIS WRITINGS FROM 1840 TO 1847

The goal of the present chapter is to present Marx's ethical views as they developed during the years from 1840 to 1847, a period that begins with a doctoral dissertation probing the relationship between freedom and necessity, and ends with a 400-page assault on ethical egoism in *The German Ideology*.

Marx's philosophical thought underwent a transformation during this time, from a Left Hegelian critique of existing society, to the formulation of historical materialism, a new philosophical and practical method to analyze and overthrow oppressive social relations and usher in a new society based on the needs of human beings. Even as we consider this development in Marx's thought, we must also appreciate the great deal of continuity in his work. It would be wrong to say, as some do³³, that *The German Ideology* represents a wholesale rejection of ethical concerns or worse yet, a turn toward a strict economic determinism in which human agency could only be an illusion. Rather, Marx's views as they are expressed in the *The German Ideology* represent not so much a break with ethical concerns or with the philosophical orientation of his works up to that point, as they do a clear articulation of the material, economic transformation that would be necessary in order to resolve the crises produced by class society,

³³ I am thinking here specifically of Louis Althusser, and especially of Althusser's book, *For Marx*, and its arguably outsized influence on the reception of Marx's thought. Also, of the recent work of Dan Brudney in his book, *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy*.

and allow for the full realization of essential human nature, ending what Marx calls the “prehistory” of human beings.

Marx, throughout his career, is concerned with the full development of concrete individuals, and the expression of their personalities. He does not think that moral injunctions alone are sufficient to bring this about. Instead, he considers what radical changes in society would permit a change and development in the real life activity of individuals. The core of his critique of capitalism is that it alienates human beings from their essence as social beings who engage in conscious, teleological interaction with their natural and social environment. Capitalism, instead of developing the “rich individual,” reduces the individual to those components of his being which are useful to capital, and in the case of “useless” individuals who are not necessary as workers, tends to the complete annihilation of their individuality, in poverty, starvation, and death. While it is sometimes held that Marx breaks with morality in *The German Ideology*, it is there that Marx writes that capitalist production produces the worker “in the role of commodity,” and in keeping with this role, produces him as “a mentally and physically dehumanized being” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:121). As I will argue throughout this chapter and over the course of this study, such charges are distinctly moral criticisms for Marx, who sees the reconciliation of human appearance with human essence, the establishment of human mastery over their natural and social environment so that they may direct them in accordance with human needs, and the pursuit of an ongoing and limitless development of human powers, as the highest moral aim for human beings.

In the 1844 manuscript, “Antithesis of Capital and Labour”, Marx writes that capitalism produces “immorality, deformity, and dulling of the workers and the capitalists” (*Economic and*

Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, MECW 3:284). All of these are considered by him to be modes of dehumanization, ways in which the human individual is stunted and prevented from realizing itself as a developing being.

Marx sees this “immorality” as a serious deficiency in human beings, one as regrettable as physical deformity and intellectual dulling. Just as capitalism produces broken, malnourished bodies, and stunted intellects, so capitalist society promotes antisocial behavior and frustrates human solidarity. It produces persons who act, not as what Marx calls “species-beings,” individuals who act under a conception of themselves and their fellows as members of one species with needs and conditions for flourishing that belong to the species, but rather as atomized, egoistic competitors who act only out of the most immediate and narrow self-interest. This “immorality” is of a kind with physical deformity and dulled senses and intellect, a failure of capitalism to develop the individual in all of his capacities, making “the life of the species into a [mere] means of individual life” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:299), and an unhappy life, at that.

Thus, while Marx's philosophy proceeds from individuals and their life-activity, and his critique of capitalism is based on its inability to permit individuals to flourish and develop their personalities, his concern with individuals should not be confused with an abstract egoism that opposes self-interest to the interests of society. Clarifying the distinction between this “abstract egoism” and a theory that upholds the primacy of actually existing individuals is the task of the immediately following section (Section 2.1), which explores these themes in Marx's doctoral dissertation, *On the Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*,

along with an evaluation of Marx's views concerning the relationship between freedom and necessity, and the relation of this to ethics.

In Section 2.2, I explain Marx's theory of alienation, and its role in explaining how it is that society frustrates the development of individuals, but also creates the possibility for an overthrow of the existing society. Marx's theory of alienation also clarifies his reasons for identifying the proletariat as a progressive, revolutionary force within capitalist society.

In Section 2.3, I address Marx's critique of rights, and show why human rights are an inadequate solution to the moral crisis created by class society. And in 2.4, I explain Marx's criticisms of the dominant moralities of his time: Christian morality, Kantianism, and Utilitarianism.

Section 2.5 explains Marx's materialist difference from and opposition to the “utopian” socialists, who thought too much could be done with good ideas, alone. Marx's emphasis on a concrete proposal to close the gap between what is and what ought to be distinguishes his approach to morality from other theories which are merely, as Marx puts it, *impuissance mise en action*³⁴.

In Section 2.6, I conclude by drawing together the major themes of the present chapter and indicating how Marx continues to develop them in his later work.

³⁴ “Impotence in action,” from Marx, *The Holy Family*, MECW 4:201.

2.1 MARX AND INDIVIDUALITY

Marxism is frequently regarded as a theoretical and political orientation that, unlike for example liberalism or libertarianism, is at odds with a concern for individual persons and their well-being. Marx's critics have attributed to him a tendency to devalue the individual, to regard it as a figment of capitalist ideology, and to be blind to the roles that individual persons play as conscious actors in human history. However, in presenting Marx in this manner, they stray very far from any faithful representation of his views. Marx does not conceive of the communist society as one in which some value (equality, material comfort, the “good of society,” etc.) is realized at the expense of individuals. Quite the opposite: Marx argues that a communist society is the only one in which the full development of all-sided individuals as the highest value for human beings can be truly realized.

Throughout his writings, a massive number of Marx's criticisms of capitalism and his arguments for communism are based on the relative abilities of these two social systems to encourage or inhibit the development of individual human beings. For example, in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx argues that capitalism is despicable because it results in “the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor” (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87), impeding the full development of the individual's capacity to act, and restricting the expression of his full personality. Under capitalism, the ability of individuals to satisfy needs and develop skills, interests, and talents is limited to those needs and skills narrowly suited to wage-labor. Communism, however, would bring about “the all-round development of the individual” (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87). Marx

justifies communism precisely on the grounds that it would permit, for the first time in human history, the full and free development of individual personalities, providing a material and economic basis that would allow persons to pursue creative endeavors and develop an array of talents and capacities determined by their own unique interests³⁵. He believes that persons in such a society would therefore experience these activities not as one or another stifling vocation, but as the active expression of their unique personalities.

Although Marx's focus on the individual has not passed entirely without mention³⁶, it remains nonetheless surprising to many that the development of the individual person is central to Marx's worldview. He is, after all, most usually (and quite rightly) associated with the seeking of collective responses to social ills. But to see this orientation as inhospitable to a concern with the individual is to rely upon a rigid opposition that is alien to Marx's own view, on which the struggle for communism is itself the struggle for “the true resolution of the strife [...] between the individual and the species” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:296).

In capitalist society, the interests of individuals regularly conflict with one another and with society as a whole. Any attempt to pursue social goods within a capitalist society must therefore involve limitations on the capacity of individuals to pursue their self-interest. (The

³⁵ And so Marx writes, famously, in *The German Ideology*:
as soon as the distribution 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 herdsman, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic. (MECW 5:47)

³⁶ I have in mind treatments such as Sowell 1963, Shaw 1980, and Forbes 1990. Jon Elster, in attempting to capture this aspect of Marx's thought, argues in the 1985 *Making Sense of Marx* that whatever is valuable in Marx's theory of history can be cashed out in terms of methodological individualism, although I think this is going too far.

particulars of what limitations ought to be placed and how they ought to be enforced is the stuff that mainstream political philosophy is made of.) Marx argues that this conflict and competition among individuals is an artifact of the specific features of class society, and not a necessary and ineliminable feature of human social interaction. His argument is not that the interests of individuals must be set aside while persons altruistically pursue “the common good,” but rather that for the vast majority of people, their material interests point to the need for an economic system in which society's productive capacity is organized and implemented for the benefit of human beings, and points away from the capitalist system that heads into ever-deepening crises, constantly plunging new layers of individual persons into dehumanizing poverty and despair. Capitalist society is so very far from valuing and meeting the needs of individual human beings that while “individualism” as a credo or buzzword holds great ideological sway, a mix of economic, political, and environmental crises present a very real ontic threat to the continued existence and development of concrete, empirical, individual human beings.

Some of the interpretations of Marx that have been most influential in the academy have focused, in different ways, on Marx's conception of individuals as historical actors. Louis Althusser, the French Marxist, famously advanced the view that concern with individuals is a youthful folly of “Early Marx,” a Left-Hegelian humanist who apparently vanished into thin air shortly before “Late Marx” put pen to paper to write *The German Ideology*, become a strict economic determinist, and make a complete break with philosophical humanism and all pretensions to moral theory³⁷. In the book, *For Marx*, Althusser attacked Soviet philosophers

³⁷ Thomas Nemeth, in his paper, “Althusser’s Anti-Humanism and Marxist Philosophy,” presents a thorough and well-researched assessment of the debates between Althusser and Soviet philosophers, which I think sheds some

developing a Marxist Humanism that would challenge Stalinist philosophy and emphasize the place of free, conscious human action in Marxist theory. He writes that one of his aims is to “draw a line of demarcation between the true theoretical bases of the Marxist science of history and Marxist philosophy on the one hand, and, on the other, the pre-Marxist idealist notions on which depend contemporary interpretations of Marxism as a ‘philosophy of man’ or a ‘Humanism’”³⁸. As Thomas Nemeth outlines in his 1980 paper, “Althusser’s Anti-Humanism and Marxist Philosophy,” these views on the part of Althusser drew him into a debate with Soviet Marxist philosophers. Althusser strictly counterposed ideology, including philosophy and humanism, in particular, to science. On this basis, Althusser argued that Marx’s turn to a more thoroughly developed and scientific approach, that of historical materialism, necessarily coincided with an abandonment of philosophy and humanism, and of themes such as alienation and human nature. One of the central tasks of the present study will be to demonstrate that in fact Marx does continue to engage with and to develop such themes throughout the whole of his intellectual corpus.

“Rational Choice Marxism,” a strand of Marxist interpretation that emerged within Anglophone analytical philosophy in the Eighties, sought to emphasize that individuals engage in rational decision-making and can and often do act on the basis of such decisions. Writers such as Jon Elster stressed that human beings occupy a role not merely as patients but also as agents in history, and that human social existence cannot be understood unless one begins with an assessment of the activity of individual persons. However, they emphasized this aspect of Marx’s

light on the shortcomings of Althusserianism as an interpretation of Marx’s theory, especially insofar as it struggles to accommodate the at least apparently philosophical aspects of Marx’s later works. *Studies in Soviet Thought*, Vol. 21, No. 4 (Nov., 1980), pp. 363-385.

³⁸ Louis Althusser, Ben Brewster (tr.) *For Marx*, Verso, 1969 p. 13.

thought at the expense of capturing how history can unfold and develop in a law-like manner, at all, and sought to replace Marx's dialectical theory of historical materialism with the methodological individualism of rational choice theory. Elster justifies this move in the following way:

It is quite extraordinary, in my view, how Marx could shift from near-nonsense to profound insight, often within the same work. In the *Grundrisse*, for instance, we have on the one hand the most striking statements of methodological collectivism and dialectical deduction, and, on the other hand, equally striking analyses of the way in which micro-motives are aggregated into macro-behaviour, to use T. C. Schelling's phrase. It is my firm belief—it is the basis, in fact, for the whole enterprise of writing this book—that the central insights of Marx are so valuable that we would do him and us a disservice were we to accept *en bloc* the methodology in which they were embedded³⁹.

A detailed evaluation of the overall merits of these schools as brands of Marxism lies somewhat beyond the purview of the present study. However, as descriptions of Marx's understanding of the role, value, and nature of individual persons, they leave a great deal to be desired. Marx (quite clearly, I think) believes that while under capitalism, society's productive forces *appear* to operate on their own accord, independently of human beings, *in fact*, these forces are the product of the activity of individuals. The historical transition from capitalism to communism is never conceived of as a process in which individuals passively succumb to economic laws that operate upon them wholly independently of their activity, but rather as the practical activity of individuals achieving rational control over their own productive forces. And I think that Marx is quite able, within the theoretical framework that he uses, to properly account for these facts about human action. Notice the following passage about life under capitalism, the

³⁹ Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* Cambridge University Press, New York:1985, pp. 4-5.

relationship between large-scale social forces and individual human activity, and the role of individuals in bringing about communism, excerpted from *The German Ideology*:

[Under capitalism] the productive forces appear as a world for themselves, quite independent of and divorced from the individuals, alongside the individuals; the reason for this is that the individuals, whose forces they are, exist split up and in opposition to one another, whilst, on the other hand, these forces are only real forces in the intercourse and association of these individuals. Thus, on the one hand, we have a totality of productive forces, which have, as it were, taken on a material form and are for the individuals themselves no longer the forces of the individuals but of private property, and hence of the individuals only insofar as they are owners of private property. [...] On the other hand, standing against these productive forces, we have the majority of the individuals from whom these forces have been wrested away, and who, robbed thus of all real life-content, have become abstract individuals, who are, however, by this very fact put into a position to enter into relation with one another *as individuals*. [...] Things have now come to such a pass that the individuals must appropriate the existing totality of productive forces, not only to achieve self-activity, but, also, merely to safeguard their very existence. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5: 86-7)

The full expression and development of individual human beings and the satisfaction of their needs is for Marx the highest aim for human beings and the basis of his moral outlook, informing both his justifications for communism and his critiques of a range of moral theories. This commitment is central to Marx's philosophy all throughout his writings. It is crucial, however, to sort out the difference between advocating for the fulfillment and development of concrete individual persons, and espousing the sort of abstract egoism that Marx frequently and energetically attacks. Marx's interest in the distinction between individuals as atomistic abstractions and individuals as real concrete beings is one that he first treats in his doctoral dissertation, *On the Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*. He returns to the question in his spirited attack on the ethical egoism of Max Stirner, a campaign which comprises the bulk of *The German Ideology*. While it is of course true that Marx's philosophy develops a great deal over the period between these two works, there is also a great deal of continuity in Marx's thought and in the types of philosophical questions he regards as central to his work.

In the following parts of this section on Marx's writings on individuals, I present his views first as they are laid out in his doctoral dissertation and then as they are developed later in *The German Ideology*.

2.1.1 Marx on Epicurus and the Swerve

Marx's doctoral dissertation, a study of the differences between the atomistic physical theories of Democritus and Epicurus, is also an early treatment by Marx of the relationship between freedom and necessity, and an examination of the ontological status of abstract objects. Marx defends Epicurus against the charge leveled against him by Cicero, Leibniz, and others, that he is little more than a poor plagiarist of Democritus. Marx argues that not only does Epicurus make unique philosophical contributions of his own, but that his physical theory represents a theoretical advance beyond Democritean atomism. This advance consists partly in Epicurean physics' avoidance of the strict mechanistic determinism that is a hallmark of Democritus's view, and Marx credits Epicurus for formulating a materialist worldview that can accommodate freedom. He also argues that Epicurus's work shows that a proper description of the world must proceed from an assessment of the sensuous activity of concretely existing individuals, and not from speculation about individuals as unqualified, ideal abstractions.

The relevance of Marx's earlier study of Greek atomistics to his conception of human individuality is clarified by a passage in *The Holy Family*, in which Marx criticizes the view that the role of the modern state is to “hold together the individual self-seeking atoms.” Marx writes, and it is worth quoting the passage at some length:

Speaking exactly and in the prosaic sense, the members of civil society are not *atoms*. The *specific property* of the atom is that it has no properties and is therefore not connected with beings outside it by any relationship determined by its own *natural necessity*. The atom *has no needs*, it is *self-sufficient*; the world outside it is an absolute *vacuum*, i.e., it is contentless, senseless, meaningless, just because the atom has *all fullness* in itself. The egoistic individual in civil society may in his non-sensuous imagination and lifeless abstraction inflate himself into an *atom*, i.e., into an unrelated, self-sufficient, wantless, *absolutely full*, blessed being. Unblessed *sensuous reality* does not bother about his imagination, each of his senses compels him to believe in the existence of the world and of individuals outside him, and even his *profane* stomach reminds him every day that the world *outside* him is not *empty*, but is what really *fills*. Every activity and property of his being, every one of his vital urges, becomes a *need*, a *necessity*, which his *self-seeking* transforms into seeking for other things and human beings outside him. [...] It is therefore not the *state* that holds the *atoms* of civil society together, but the fact that they are *atoms* only in *imagination*, in the *heaven* of their fancy, but in *reality* beings tremendously different from atoms, in other words, not *divine egoists*, but *egoistic human beings*. (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:120-1)

Marx's study of the atom, though too-often ignored, figures importantly in his philosophical development. Marx draws upon it here precisely because classical liberal political philosophy relies so heavily on the conception of the human being as an isolated being, who needs little from other human beings and from society except perhaps to be left alone to pursue its own happiness. Human beings are individuals, yes, but *real*, *concrete* individuals with needs that impel them constantly to seek out other human individuals and maintain relationships with them, and to make use of the natural world, metabolizing it as what Marx calls their "inorganic body." For individual human persons to flourish, develop, and maintain a continued existence, they must make their needs effective in the world outside themselves and realize themselves in and through their connections with the outside world. It is in this way that an individual person's "self-seeking" can be transformed "into seeking for other things and human beings outside him." In order to further understand the relationship of Marx's study of atoms to his theory of human individuality, it will be first necessary to describe the physical systems of Democritus and Epicurus in a bit of detail.

Democritus argued that the fundamental physical structure of matter is composed of atoms—small, indivisible particles—that move in straight lines. The motion of atoms in Democritean physics is determined entirely by external forces on them, either the downward pull of gravity, or the force of collisions between atoms. Epicurus adopted the framework of Democritean atomism, but, notably, with the following alteration: atoms did not simply move in a straight line, the path of which was strictly determined by external forces acting on the atom. Rather, atoms sometimes, but not always, “swerved” slightly from their original paths, in a motion determined not by the action of external forces, but by the atoms' own intrinsic natures.

As Walter Englert argues persuasively in his very useful book, *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, Epicurus developed his doctrine of the swerve as a response to a challenge from Aristotle to explain the motion of animals—a self-movement which resisted explanation in terms of strict mechanistic determinism—using atomistic theory⁴⁰. This challenge left Epicurus with two choices: “either to assert that living creatures only apparently had this power, and that all their motions could be explained in terms of the weight and collisions of atoms from which they are made, or to find a new motion in the atoms that could account for the property in animals” (Englert, p. 55). Epicurus chose the latter course. With the addition of the swerve to his atomistic physics, Epicurus posited a type of atomic motion that allowed for atoms to move in ways not determined purely by their weight and collisions. The apparently nondeterministic and voluntary motion of animals could then be explained in virtue of this property of the atoms that comprised them.

⁴⁰ Walter Englert, *Epicurus on the Swerve and Voluntary Action*, Scholars Press, 1987.

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

The contradiction between existence and essence, between matter and form, which is inherent in the concept of the atom, emerges in the individual atom itself once it is endowed with qualities. Through the quality the atom is alienated from its concept, but at the same time is perfected in its construction. It is from repulsion and the ensuing conglomerations of the qualified atoms that the world of appearance now emerges. (*Doctoral Dissertation on Epicurus*, MECW 1:61)

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

For the atom to exist and be real, it must have certain spatial qualities such as size, shape, and weight and thus take on a determinate existence. However, as a determinate being with material existence, the atom must take on qualities or properties that contradict its essence as pure immediacy and abstract individuality (alienation). It is this contradiction between material existence and essence (Concept) that lies at the heart of Epicurus's philosophy and his view of

Greek society. Marx saw in Epicurus the first philosopher to incorporate the notion of the contradiction between essence and reality into his thought.⁴¹

Abstract unqualified objects cannot exist because they cannot affect matter, and thereby cannot bring about the expression of their essences. It is for this reason that Marx says “abstract individuality is freedom from being, not freedom in being” (*Doctoral Dissertation on Epicurus*, MECW 1:62). Moreover, Marx argued, reasoning based on contemplation of such abstract objects will necessarily lapse into methodological idealism, eschewing material determinations as *mere* appearances that distract from a proper appreciation of the nature of reality, rather than being the absolute starting place for a proper understanding of reality.

The Epicurean swerve was attacked by a number of commentators on the basis that Epicurus provided inadequate philosophical justification for belief in such a property of atoms. Cicero notably complained that Epicurus's doctrine of the swerve was “wishful thinking, not careful argumentation.” He argued that Epicurus's theory of the swerve was lacking, since Epicurus says

neither that an atom moves from its place and swerves because it is struck from without, nor that there is some cause in the void through which the atom moves which explains why it does not move in a straight line, nor that there is in the atom itself some change which occurs on account of which the natural motion of its own weight does not obtain. (Cicero, *De Fato*⁴² 46-47)

Marx argues that this demand for a cause of the swerve is in fact beside the point, since for it to be caused in the way that Cicero demands would be for it to be brought back into the domain of a mechanistic determinism. Marx writes, “To inquire after the cause that makes the

⁴¹ George McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients: Classical Ethics, Social Justice, and Nineteenth-Century Political Economy*, Savage: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1990, p.31.

⁴² This is Englert's translation of the text, and it appears in Walter G. Englert, *Epicurus on the swerve and voluntary action*, Scholars Press, 1987 p.56.

atom a principle—a clearly meaningless inquiry to anyone for whom the atom is the cause of everything, hence without cause itself” (*Doctoral Dissertation on Epicurus*, MECW 1:50).

Marx's defense of the Epicurean swerve is that on Epicurus's physics, the atom itself is the active principle in nature. Therefore, the movement of Epicurus's atom is so very far from requiring an explanation in terms of the forces exerted upon it by the rest of the natural world, that the Epicurean atom itself determines that world. Marx admires in Epicurus's thought its lack of reliance upon an external source of motion (such as, to name one, Aristotle's “unmoved mover”), in order to explain the existence and appearance of the natural world. For Epicurus, the activity of individual atoms explains the observable phenomena of the natural world.

While for our purposes it is necessary to present a general explanation of the doctrines in Epicurus that Marx chose to treat in his first extended philosophical work, what is crucial to notice in the doctoral dissertation is not so much this or that vagary of Epicurus's physics and Marx's reaction to each bit of it, but rather Marx's interest in defending what he recognizes as a brand of materialism that can accommodate freedom, conscious activity and intervention into the material world. It also tells against the view that Marx himself espoused a mechanistic determinism that would have far more in common with Democritus, whose physics he already rejects at this stage in his philosophical development, than it does with Epicurus. However, Marx is also critical of the role that atoms as abstract individuals continue to play in Epicurus's physics. As McCarthy writes:

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

It would be Marx's immediate task in his early writings to move from one level to the other, to move from abstract self-consciousness and freedom to concrete self-consciousness in the political economy. In order to overcome the contradictions of existence and essence—materialism and

ethics—implicit in Epicurean physics, the alienation of the objective and physical world must be overcome through social praxis. The theoretical praxis and ethical critique of the philosopher must be transformed into effective action on the world and a change-over of the institutions of political economy. The *Dissertation* sets the path, the direction, and the priorities for Marx's earliest and later studies on the social relations of production. Just as the *Dissertation* begins with a critique of the foreign externality of nature, *Capital* begins with a critique of the “natural laws” of political economy. It is this relation between self-consciousness and nature in all its material forms—from physics to political economy—that is at the heart and soul of Marx's lifework. (McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, pp. 44-45)

In certain quarters, Marx is understood as having failed to recognize or at least, been unable to successfully account for, the role of the individual person, either as a moral subject or as a historical actor. It is true that Marx rejects what I refer to here as “abstract individualism.” But far from downplaying or ignoring the nature of the human individual and her needs as an individual, Marx bases both his political theory and his moral outlook on humans as they exist; natural and social beings, with needs that impel them to associate with one another. These themes are already present in his doctoral dissertation, in his argument against the existence of abstract objects, and in his insistence that a correct description of reality must be based on the sensuous activity of concrete individual beings. Marx further clarifies his conception of individuality, together with its consequences for morality, in *The German Ideology*, as I will discuss in the following subsection.

2.1.2 Marx's Treatment of Individuality in The German Ideology

Many of the themes in Marx's dissertation on Epicurus remain salient in *The German Ideology*, which represents Marx's first mature expression of his materialist worldview, and the first sustained explication and application of the method of historical materialism. “The first premise

of all human history,” Marx writes, “is, of course, the existence of living human individuals” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:31). He continues

The social structure and the state are continually evolving out of the life-process of definite individuals, however, of these individuals, not as they may appear in their own or other people’s imagination, but as they *actually* are⁴³, i.e. as they act, produce materially, and hence as they work under definite material limits, presuppositions and conditions independent of their will. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:35-6)

In drawing his conclusions about the sort of society that would be conducive to the development and well-being of human persons, Marx's method is not to proceed from an abstract conception of “Man,” but rather, to begin with a careful evaluation of individual human beings and their practical activity. “Real, positive science,” he writes, is the “expounding of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:37).

Marx writes that his method is therefore distinct from both empiricism and idealism:

[Historical materialism's] premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and rigidity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under definite conditions. As soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:37)

His method is not speculative, imposing theory upon reality, but rather proceeds from an evaluation of individual human beings and their activity. The relevance this has for Marx's

⁴³ Lest this should seem too uncontroversial a method, contrast Marx's statement here with this statement of John Rawls's, in *Political Liberalism*: “I can, however, sketch an account of a political conception of the person drawn on in setting up the original position. To understand what is meant by describing a conception of the person as political, consider how citizens are represented in that position as free persons. The representation of their freedom seems to be one source of the idea that a metaphysical doctrine is presupposed. Now citizens are conceived as thinking of themselves as free in three respects [...] First, citizens are free in that they conceive of themselves and of one another as having the moral power to have a conception of the good. [...] A second respect in which citizens view themselves as free is that they regard themselves as self-authenticating sources of valid claims. [...] The third respect in which citizens are viewed as free is that they are viewed as capable of taking responsibility for their ends and this affects how their various claims are assessed. [...] [T]he aim of justice as fairness is to resolve [the question of which conception of political justice is most appropriate for realizing in basic institutions the values of liberty and equality] by *starting from the idea of society as a fair system of cooperation in which the fair terms of cooperation are agreed upon by citizens so conceived* (Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp.29-34). (My emphasis.)

approach to morality is that he does not proceed from an abstract concept of goodness and then judge how far the existing state of affairs strays from this ideal. He begins by examining existing human beings and their activity, and determining what goals are already aimed at in and suggested by this activity. As Marx writes earlier in the *German Ideology*

Communism for us is not a condition that is to be established nor an ideal to which reality must adjust itself. We call communism the actual movement which abolishes present conditions. The conditions under which this movement proceeds result from those now existing. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:49)

Although it is not widely regarded as such, I argue that *The German Ideology* is a valuable work of moral philosophy, and an important expression of Marx's moral outlook. After all, roughly two-thirds of the hefty volume is devoted to a merciless critique of Max Stirner's 1845 defense of ethical egoism, *The Ego and Its Own*⁴⁴ (*Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*⁴⁵). Also, while I reserve most of what I have to say regarding the concept of alienation in Marx's early works for the following section of this chapter, here I discuss Marx's disagreements with Stirner on the question of how to solve the problem of alienation, a question which figures importantly into Marx's moral thought.

Marx's polemic against ethical egoism has been largely ignored, partly due to the fact that *The German Ideology* was not published until 1933, nearly ninety years after its completion. Moreover, the book runs roughly 700 pages, and in its abridged form, the form in which it is most commonly read (especially by English-language readers), the 400 pages of polemic against Stirner have been excised. The polemic itself is challenging for even the most careful reader if he has not read Stirner's book, required reading among intellectuals in 1845 Berlin, but almost

⁴⁴ Max Stirner, David Leopold (tr.), *The Ego and Its Own*, Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁴⁵ This title is sometimes translated into English, more aptly, I think, as "*The Individual and His Property*."

totally forgotten today. These factors have contributed to Marx's attack on Stirner being overlooked and deemed inessential at best, a condition which is little changed since Paul Thomas rightly pointed out in his 1975 paper, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner," that *The German Ideology*:

has rarely been read in its entirety; the long section Marx devoted to a phrase-by-phrase dissection of Max Stirner's *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum*, in particular, has been almost completely ignored. [...] The task remains both to credit Marx's critique of Stirner with the importance it deserves, and to consider this critique in its context. (Thomas, "Karl Marx and Max Stirner", pg. 159)

In *The Ego and Its Own*, Stirner rejects all morality on the basis that it demands the sacrifice of the individual for a good that is not his own. Of course, communism is included in this category of theories that posit a "good cause" for which the individual must sacrifice himself⁴⁶. Stirner discovers that every "good cause," which has been thought to be a good in

⁴⁶ Nicholas Churchich seems to concur with Stirner's critique of Marx's communism. Churchich writes, "While it is debatable whether Marx is an individualist or an anti-individualist, in *The German Ideology* he definitely argues for the primacy and supremacy of collectivism. Like Rousseau, he starts with individualism but ends with the sacrifice of the individual to the collective and of private interests to the interests of the whole" (Churchich, *Marxism and Morality*, p.165). Churchich does not provide a clear argument for this view, but it seems to me that his reason for holding it is that he rejects Marx's claim that "abstract egoism" is a historical phenomenon produced by particular social and economic conditions, and not a necessary and ineliminable feature of human nature. Churchich writes that "Marx has failed to trace egoism to its real source within the personality of the human individual himself. He has also failed to understand that it is only by man's own moral effort that the harmonisation of self-interest and common interests is possible. The centre of man's moral and social life must be found within the self rather than outside it" (Churchich, *Marxism and Morality*, p.164). If that all is true, then Marx's solution to the antagonism between individual and society would indeed be unsatisfactory. If Stirnerian egoism is an ineliminable part of human nature, then all the social transformations in the world could not resolve the conflict between such egoistic individuals, and the interests of the community taken as a whole, and so realizing social, communal goods would indeed mean violating the private interests of Stirnerian egoists. However, 1) it strikes me as somewhat disingenuous to attribute to Marx the view that he espouses the sacrifice of the individual, because Marx pointedly does *not* think that egoism is a necessary feature of human beings, and argues that the transition to the sort of socialist society he espouses would be a transition in which this egoism fades away as an aspect of human life, and 2) Churchich means to put the burden of proof onto Marx to show that human nature is plastic and adaptable, but it seems to me that it is Churchich who is operating with the much more robust and "thick" conception of human nature, and so what we need in order to agree with him that Marx's communism must necessarily involve the sacrifice of the individual's interests, is a very good argument to show that it can never be possible for human beings to exist without Stirnerian egoism. When Churchich does attempt to give such an argument, he refers to something that is much like a soul—the immutable "personality of the human individual himself." Elsewhere, he writes that "Moral values, it must be recognised, are rooted in the endeavour of personal spirits and without this endeavour they could not be sustained" (Churchich, *Marxism and*

itself, is actually an egoistic cause, seeking its own good. (Apparently, causes are quite capable of engaging in their own self-directed activity, not to mention, of duping human beings into servitude.) For Stirner, the human pursuit of a “good cause” is always little more than a new brand of sacrifice and self-denial. Therefore, since every cause is itself an “egoistic cause,” individuals should take the place of their own “good causes,” and pursue only the narrowest self-interest. Stirner writes:

What is not supposed to be my concern! First and foremost the good cause, then God's cause, the cause of mankind, of truth, of freedom, of humanity, of justice; further, the cause of my people, my prince, my fatherland; finally, even the cause of mind and a thousand other causes. Only my cause is never to be my concern. [...] My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is *mine* [*das Meinige*], and it is not a general one, but is—*unique* [*einzig*], as I am unique. Nothing is more to me than myself! (Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p.5-7)

Stirner's writings might have been dismissed at the time of their publication, had they not been quite so effective against their principal target: the ethical humanism of Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach famously argued in *The Essence of Christianity* that “God” was merely an abstraction and personification of man's qualities. “The Divine Being,” he wrote, “is nothing other than the being of man himself, or rather, the being of man abstracted from the limits of the individual man or the real, corporeal man, and objectified, i.e., contemplated and worshiped as another being, as a being distinguished from his own”⁴⁷ (Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook*, p.111). The oppressive, alienating nature of religion would be overcome once God was replaced by “Man” as

Morality, p.99). Churchich is openly hostile to materialism, at one point even taking on a rather suspicious tone with regard to Marx and Engels' belief in evolution, “Assuming that men are the direct descendants of creatures which in the form of their bodies and brains were similar to apes, Engels indicates [...]” (Churchich, *Marxism and Morality*, p. 98). It seems to me that positing the existence of a “human personality” or of “personal spirits” which make Stirnerian egoism impossible to abolish involves much more controversial and tendentious assumptions than any that Marx can be accused of making.

⁴⁷ Ludwig Feuerbach, George Eliot (tr.), *The Fiery Brook: selected writings of Ludwig Feuerbach* Anchor Books, 1972.

a divinity for himself, and human beings shed their pious attitude toward the abstraction, God, and took up a new one toward the abstraction, Man, recognizing that what had previously been regarded as a superhuman being was in fact only an objectification and deification of human qualities. Through the adoption of this new correct idea, “what is regarded as atheism today,” namely, the denial of the existence of God, “will be religion tomorrow” (Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook*, p.130), a religion of Man. But Thomas 1975 is very clear in explaining the seriousness of the challenge Stirner posed to this view:

The weakness in Feuerbach's argument that Stirner seizes upon is rooted in Feuerbach's conception of man's divinity, not as something man had to build or to create, but as something to be regained at the level of consciousness. Once it is regained, man must by implication give way before his new-found divinity. Stirner maintained that "divinity" will be as oppressive and burdensome a taskmaster as any other spirit or collectivity to which individuals, historically, have succumbed. [...] Feuerbach's celebrated reversal of subject and predicate--his substitution of man for God as the agent of divinity--changes nothing; mankind as a collectivity is just as oppressive and sacred as God, because the real individual continues to be related to it in a religious manner. (Thomas 1975, p.161-2)

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

Marx (as did many of the Young Hegelians) recognized the importance of Stirner's book as a critique of Feuerbach's ethical humanism. A mere change in thought would not resolve the

problem of alienation or do away with the self-renunciation of the individual which was characteristic of religious practice. However, Stirner himself made the same mistakes he accused Feuerbach of, lapsing into idealism and attributing to “causes” powers over human beings which they simply could not have (as though it were really the “causes,” the “fixed ideas,” that had led human beings astray, and not the real relations between human beings that had given rise to these ideas in the first place). Accordingly, Stirner's proposed solution to the problem was one that could be carried out entirely in the realm of thought: individuals had simply to choose to pursue their own narrow self-interest as an egoistic cause. “In the final analysis,” Marx writes, Stirner:

arrives merely at an impotent moral injunction that everybody should himself obtain satisfaction and carry out punishment. He believes Don Quixote's assurance that by a mere moral injunction he can without more ado convert the material forces arising from the division of labour into personal forces. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:342-3)

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

only be resolved through a transformation of society, brought about through coordinated human action aimed at common goals.

The connection between individual and society in Marx's thought is further clarified in Marx's defense of communism against Stirner's charge that communism calls for the subordination of individuals to the "good cause" of society. Stirner argues that for communists, "Society, from which we have everything, is a new master, a new spook, a new 'supreme being'" (Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, p.111), for whom the individual must sacrifice himself. Marx answers that far from denigrating the individual, the development of a communist society, and the practical activity required to achieve that society, are the only methods by which the well-being of individuals can actually be pursued, a goal which Stirner's "mere moral injunctions" cannot achieve. Stirner is mistaken in believing

that the communists want to "make sacrifices" for "society", when they want at most to sacrifice existing society; in this case he should describe their consciousness that their struggle is the common cause of all people who have outgrown the bourgeois system as a sacrifice that they make to themselves. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:213)

Stirner, on the other hand, offers no genuine solution to the real challenges that concrete individuals face. He argues against any organized political (much less, revolutionary) activity on the grounds that such coordinated, planned action would subordinate the individual to the needs of a collective. (Stirner does imagine that individuals might spontaneously form a "Union of Egoists" whose purpose is to restrict any social incursion into their egoistic pursuits, but provides no explanation as to how such a union might be achieved.) Marx points to the workers' movement, a real political movement developing at the time of his writing as a means by which the social conditions that limit the ability of individuals to flourish and pursue their own development as an end might be abolished. Stirner turns his back on this existing political current

and retreats into the realm of ideas, thereby depriving himself of any genuine explanation of how the problem of alienation might be solved.

2.1.3 Conclusion of Section on Individuality in Marx's Early Writings

In this section, I have argued that while Marx rejects abstract individualism, he theorizes concrete individuality throughout his early writings, including *The German Ideology*. The distinction between the two ways of conceptualizing human individuals can be understood in large part as a distinction between methodological idealism and methodological materialism in understanding human social existence. Abstract individualism, Marx writes, suffers from the fact that it proceeds from the self-conception of bourgeois actors, taking for granted their self-understanding as essentially autonomous persons whose ability to satisfy their egoistic interests is limited by the existence of other, competitive and equally autonomous individuals. However, from a materialist point of view, it is clear to see that these bourgeois atoms exist only in thought; in reality, human individuality can only emerge and develop in and through society, which is not merely some necessary evil erected and tolerated in order to keep the competing atoms at bay. Rather, it is the necessary condition for the development of human beings who exist not merely as what Marx later calls “herd animals” or as exemplars of the species, but rather as real, concrete individuals who interact with the natural and social world in increasingly diverse ways. In any case, I would certainly disagree with the claim made by Nicholas Churchich in his book, *Marxism and morality: a critical examination of Marxist ethics*: “in *The German Ideology* [Marx] definitely argues for the primacy and supremacy of collectivism. Like Rousseau, he starts

with individualism but ends with the sacrifice of the individual to the collective and of private interests to the interests of the whole”⁴⁸.

On the model of human beings as essentially competitive atoms, personal freedom is, first and foremost, having relations in which the influence of society upon the individual is as attenuated as possible. (Think here of Isaiah Berlin's identification of purely negative freedom as the only politically or morally valuable freedom, a freedom from the influence or the claims of other individuals who likewise pursue their own narrow self-interest⁴⁹. But as Marx argues in the passage from *The Holy Family* which I cited earlier in this chapter, “Every activity and property of his being, every one of his vital urges, becomes a *need*, a *necessity*, which his *self-seeking* transforms into seeking for other things and human beings outside him” (*The Holy Family*, *MECW 4:120*). The desire for self-realization and for the satisfying of one's own needs is not a desire for fewer or less significant relationships to other human beings. In practice, it is rather a desire for more and richer connections and interactions with the world outside of oneself, including with other individuals. As we will see throughout this study and especially in later chapters, one of Marx's most trenchant critiques of class society and of capitalism in particular is that human beings are actually much less able to satisfy their needs and to freely direct their lives than they would be in a society in which decisions about how society is to be arranged and how its resources are to be used were made socially and democratically, and in a conscious and planned manner. Indeed, a real development of human individuality, according to Marx, can only be made possible through massive encroachments on the “individual rights” of bourgeois

⁴⁸ Nicholas Churchich, *Marx and Morality: a critical examination of Marxist ethics* James Clarke & Co., 1994 p.165.

⁴⁹ See Isaiah Berlin, *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, 1969.

property owners to direct social resources according to their own private, egoistic needs and free from social interference.

In the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes that a scientific approach to understanding human existence will require an awareness and an analysis of the “rich human being” who “is simultaneously the human being *in need of* a totality of human manifestations of life--the man in whom his own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as *need*” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, MECW 3:304*). Years later, in the *Grundrisse*, Marx refers to this process of self-realization as “the development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as it is in its consumption” (*Grundrisse, MECW 28:251*). Human beings in class society, Marx argues, are in various ways hampered and limited in their ability to pursue their own realization—their own free and full development, the satisfaction of their expanding needs and the proliferation of their powers—as an end. In the following section, in which I address Marx's treatment of alienation in his early works, we will investigate the nature of these limitations further and examine how Marx thinks they can be overcome in a transition to a communist society.

2.2 ALIENATION

Alienation, in its most basic form, is a condition in which human existence takes on a character that is at odds with human nature. Otherwise put, in alienation, human appearance is not reconciled with human essence. Although human beings are essentially social beings who produce their own existence through conscious, purposive activity in the labor process, when

human beings are alienated from their essence, this process in which they consciously and purposively direct and produce their own existence is frustrated. Human beings' products—material, social, and intellectual—take on a foreign and hostile character. Instead of furthering human aims, in alienation, human aims are thwarted by their own products. The products seem to exist independently, as though their emergence and development were not determined by human activity. The fact that these things have been produced through human activity, and can be controlled and directed through that activity, is partly or entirely obscured. Alienation is not only an inversion of the relationship between human beings and their products, but it is also a condition in which human beings are alienated from their essence as social beings who produce their own environment and reproduce their own existence through labor.

Marx describes numerous instances of alienation. A factory worker whose job is to play assistant to a machine, making its “activity” more efficient and ensuring that its processes unfold smoothly, is alienated in numerous ways, one of which is that here the machine seems truly active, while the worker is little more than an appendage to it. Economic laws of supply and demand appear to be responsible for the thousands of people thrown out of work when a business shuts down. But those laws themselves are simply the abstract expression of an assembly of social relations which could be fundamentally transformed through the conscious and rational intervention of human beings into their own economic and historical development. In religion, myths and characters that human beings have created appear as forces that exist independently from human beings and direct their lives. And while human beings have created these characters, in religious belief this relation is inverted, so that human beings believe that it is the characters who have created them.

Alienation is not unique to capitalist society; rather, it has been a feature of all class societies. But under capitalism, alienation has been developed and sharpened to an extent not reached in those earlier societies. As Marx writes in the 1844 Manuscript, “Rent of Land,” it is necessary that the “romantic” appearance of feudal relations

[...] be abolished--that landed property, the root of private property, be dragged completely into the movement of private property and that it become a commodity; that the rule of the proprietor appear as the undisguised rule of private property, of capital, freed of all political tincture; that the relationship between proprietor and worker be reduced to the economic relationship of exploiter and exploited; that all [...] personal relationship between the proprietor and his property cease, property becoming merely objective, material wealth; that the marriage of convenience should take the place of the marriage of honour with the land; and that the land should likewise sink to the status of a commercial value, like man. It is essential that that which is the root of landed property--filthy self-interest--make its appearance, too, in its cynical form. It is essential that the immovable monopoly turn into the mobile and restless monopoly, into competition; and that the idle enjoyment of the products of other people's blood and sweat turn into a bustling commerce in the same commodity. Lastly, it is essential that in this competition landed property, in the form of capital, manifest its dominion over both the working class and the proprietors themselves who are either being ruined or raised by the laws governing the movement of capital. The medieval proverb *nulle terre sans seigneur* is thereby replaced by that other proverb, *l'argent n'a pas de maître*, wherein is expressed the complete domination of dead matter over man. (“Rent of Land,” *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:266)

Under capitalism, the economic tendency is for absolutely everything to be converted into a commodity—something that is up for sale and potentially alienable. This includes human beings' own capacity to perform labor, as the majority of human beings are compelled to take their labor-power to market. (And as United States Representative Steven King recently stated, arguing on the floor of the House of Representatives against wage protections for workers, “Labor is a commodity just like corn or beans or oil or gold, and the value of it needs to be determined by the competition, supply and demand in the workplace⁵⁰.” He was roundly—and rightly—criticized for justifying *laissez-faire* economic policies with this comment. However, it would be quite wrong to ignore or deny that Rep. King made a very succinct and accurate, if

⁵⁰ Political Correction, <http://politicalcorrection.org/blog/201106020015> Retrieved: July 6, 2011.

brutal, statement of a central principle of capitalist production. It is merely the approving formulation of what Marx already mentioned in 1844: that in capitalism, “the worker's existence is [...] brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity” (*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:65).

The appearance of human beings as atomized individuals striving for the satisfaction of mere “egoistic need” also develops hand in hand with the expansion and sharpening of alienation. As the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, Istvan Mészáros, writes, in capitalist society,

Alienation is therefore characterized by the universal extension of 'saleability' (i.e. the transformation of everything into commodity); by the conversion of human beings into “things” so that they could appear as commodities on the market (in other words: the 'reification' of human relations); and by the fragmentation of the social body into 'isolated individuals' (*vereinzelte Einzelnen*) who pursued their own limited, particularistic aims 'in servitude to egoistic need', making a virtue out of their selfishness in their cult of privacy⁵¹.

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

Selling [*Veräußerung*] is the practical aspect of alienation [*Entäußerung*]. Just as man, as long as he is in the grip of religion, is able to objectify his essential nature only by turning it into something *alien*, something fantastic, so under the domination of egoistic need he can be active practically, and produce objects in practice, only by putting his products, and his activity, under the domination of an alien being, and bestowing the significance of an alien entity – money – on them. (*On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:174)

However, the sale of labor-power to satisfy private, “egoistic” needs is particularly alienating in that “Estranged labour reverses this relationship [between conscious being and species being], so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his *essential being*, a mere means to his *existence*.” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of*

⁵¹ Meszaros, Istvan, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p. 35.

1844, MECW 3:276). Labor under capitalism alienates the human being from his own essence, and changes “the life of the species into a means of individual life” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:276) insofar as man's essential nature as a member of the species *Homo sapiens*, his ability to labor, is converted into a commodity to be sold in order to satisfy the private, egoistic needs of the individual. It is this inversion which Marx argues would (and should) be set aright in the transition to a communist society.

I devote the bulk of the present section to a discussion of the alienation of workers through the sale of their labor-power. However, both worker and capitalist are alienated under capitalist society, a point which it is crucial not to ignore. According to Marx, everyone who lives under capitalism lives in a society governed by anarchic laws and processes that operate beyond anyone's control (again, think here of the economic laws of supply and demand which not only determine the fate of the worker, but also dictate to the capitalist what and how much is to be produced, and under what conditions). Under capitalism, both workers and capitalists take part in human activity that is directed at the accumulation of profit as its highest end, and are therefore alienated insofar as they fail to recognize human development (the realization of human essence as an active adaptation to the environment through the labor process, and the ongoing and limitless development of human powers) as the highest aim for human beings and to engage in practices that reflect that status.

The question arises, then, of why, if both capitalist and worker are alienated in capitalist society, does Marx focus on the working class as a potentially revolutionary force in society, and not on the capitalists who apparently hold so much more power? The answer is twofold. First, Marx argues that because of their role in production, workers are uniquely positioned to redirect

society's resources and make human development the conscious aim of human production. Capitalism socializes the labor process, prompting relations of solidarity and cooperation to develop among workers—it is precisely the further development of such relations that would help contribute to the production of a society based on human solidarity and democratic control of the means of production. Relatedly, while it is not possible for every person to be a capitalist, it is possible to have a society in which every person is a worker. The worker's conditions of existence are generalizable in a manner that would allow for the abolition of class society (for everyone to be a member of the same class is for there to be no classes at all). And Marx argues that it is the abolition of class society, together with a preservation and further development of the productive capacities developed in capitalism, that can provide the material basis for the abolition of alienation.

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

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is, to use an expression of Hegel, in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature. (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:36)

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

Labour to earn a living involves: 1) estrangement and fortuitous connection between labour and the subject who labours; 2) estrangement and fortuitous connection between labour and the object

of labour; 3) that the worker's role is determined by social needs which, however, are alien to him and a compulsion to which he submits out of egoistic need and necessity, and which have for him only the significance of a means of satisfying his dire need, just as for them he exists only as a slave of their needs; 4) that to the worker the maintenance of his individual existence appears to be the *purpose* of his activity and what he actually does is regarded by him only as a means; that he carries on his life's activity in order to earn means of *subsistence*. Hence the greater and the more developed the social power appears to be within the private property relationship, the more egoistic, asocial and estranged from his own nature does man become. (*Comments on James Mill*, MECW 3:220)

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

It is true that throughout most of the history of capitalist society, we do not see the overwhelming majority of workers consciously struggling together to bring about communism. However, workers do attempt, in various ways, to resist the oppressive conditions of capitalist society. They do so, for instance, when they strike against low wages, demand a shorter workday, or fight to keep their pensions. And, at crucial points, workers can and do become revolutionary. Marx examines the history of those working class struggles as well as the economic, political, and social context in which they are waged. He also develops a conception of human nature and of human needs that is abstracted out of the real existence of individual human beings throughout history. Looking at human needs, and analyzing the content of workers' demands and determining what sort of society would be necessary in order for these needs and demands to be met, Marx argues that these needs and these demands point to the need for human beings to achieve a communist society.

Although as I have noted, there are a number of forms of alienation, in the present section, I focus on Marx's discussion of alienated labor in capitalist society. Much of Marx's early remarks about human alienation and alienated labor in particular are contained in *The*

Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, and so I give special attention to that group of writings.

In the manuscript titled “Estranged Labor,” Marx writes that “The alienation of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists *outside* him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:272). In unalienated production, a person's products would be a confirmation and expression of individuality and free activity, and ability to appropriate and transform nature to achieve human ends. However, under capitalism, the worker's own product seems to him like an enemy, because it is produced not in accordance with the worker's teleological goal-positing but rather in accordance with the economic laws of supply and demand, which operate in spite of him. As a commodity, the product becomes added to the capitalist's store of “dead labor”, of capital. Possessed now of a mass of stored-up accumulated labor, the capitalist is in a position to exercise even greater control over workers. Production appears to worsen the worker's lot, rather than to improve it. The capitalist who can sell off his supply of wares in order to satisfy his needs is in a much better position to wait out a strike than is the worker who has nothing to sell but his own labor-power, which he cannot store but must constantly sell in order to satisfy his needs. As a result, “The worker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things” (MECW 3:272).

If the result of labor under capitalism is the alienation of the worker in his product, then, Marx reasons, the activity of labor itself must be a process of active alienation, since “the

product is after all but the summary of the activity, of production” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:274). He writes that labor under capitalism is active alienation in several respects:

First, the fact that labour is *external* to the worker, i. e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is *forced labour*. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a *means* to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labour is shunned like the plague. External labour, labour in which man alienates himself, is a labour of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labour for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him--that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity--so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:274)

In this description of the character of labor, Marx turns his attention from the worker's product as accumulated or “dead” labor, to the character of the labor process itself. Labor, Marx thinks, is in reality the essence of free human activity and a process through which human nature can be fully realized. However, under capitalism, labor is so odious that the worker performs labor only because through the sale of his labor-power he can satisfy his private needs. Insofar as the worker's labor-power is not his own, and belongs to a foreign power (the capitalist), labor appears as a denial and a sacrifice of the worker's existence, and as something to be studiously avoided whenever possible.

Because labor takes on such an unattractive character, instead of recognizing the labor process as the essence of human activity, workers feel that they are truly themselves and truly

human only when they are at leisure or satisfying those needs which they have in common with animals.

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

Certainly eating, drinking, procreating, etc., are also genuinely human functions. But taken abstractly, separated from the sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends, they are animal functions. (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:275)

In the Introduction to this study, I discussed the distinction between natural being and social being. Insofar as humans are natural, biological beings, they have their natural needs more or less in common with other mammals. Their biological make-up is such that in order for the human species to persist and to flourish, human beings must have their biological needs for food, water, housing, and so on, satisfied, and they must continue to propagate themselves as a species through sexual reproduction. Human beings are distinct from other natural beings, however, in that they satisfy these natural needs socially, through the labor process. Human beings, through socially mediated labor, intervene consciously and purposively into their environments in order to satisfy their natural needs and in so doing, transform both their environments and themselves, produce new forms of social interaction, and develop new powers and in turn, new social, historically arisen needs. They produce themselves not merely as natural, but also as social beings. In unalienated labor, human beings recognize this continual process of satisfying social, historically arisen needs and developing new powers as an end in itself, the realization of human beings' essential nature as natural and social beings who satisfy their needs through labor.

In alienated labor, natural, biological needs, instead of being regarded as the ontological basis for a limitless development of social, historically arisen needs, are “separated from the

sphere of all other human activity and turned into sole and ultimate ends.” The powers which have been developed in and through human history—capacities for language, for theorizing, for engineering, and so on—are converted into little more than new ways of satisfying man's natural, biological needs and of serving his “animal functions.” As a result of the odious character of labor under capitalism, workers subjectively experience themselves in their “animal functions” as free and active, and experience themselves in their distinctively human functions as little more than animals.

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

This relation is the relation of the worker to his own activity as an alien activity not belonging to him; it is activity as suffering, strength as weakness, begetting as emasculating, the worker's own physical and mental energy, his personal life--for what is life but activity?--as an activity which is turned against him, independent of him and not belonging to him. Here we have self-estrangement, as previously we had the estrangement of the thing. (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, MECW 3:275)

And if the worker is alienated from his product and from himself, then, Marx argues, these things must have been alienated to someone else—to other human beings. “Every self-estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself. [...] [The worker] creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product” (*Economic and*

Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, MECW 3:279). Hence what seemed to be a domination of things over human beings turns out to be a social relation: the domination of capitalists over workers.

The alienation of the worker's labor results in the possession of that labor by another human being. Marx argues that every “self-estrangement” is realized and expressed as a relationship between human beings. The worker “creates the domination of the person who does not produce over production and over the product” (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:279). It is for this reason that the working class alone has the capacity to abolish the dominion of man over man and heed the categorical imperative to “overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being” (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:182).

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

Yet, alienation does not only affect workers. Capitalists also experience alienation, albeit in a different form. They experience their decisions as dictated by economic laws of supply and demand that appear to operate independently of human actors. However, these economic laws can allow them to expand their financial wealth, and so capitalists tend to experience alienation as friendly and affirming, and as a phenomenon which affords them some “semblance of a human existence,” to return to Marx's remarks in *The Holy Family*.

It is the sale of labor-power and the proletariat's active self-alienation that produces alienation for both capitalist and worker. Hence, Marx writes, “the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation” (MECW 3:280). The workers cannot abolish their own alienation as a class without also abolishing a society based on the separation of human beings from their essential human nature, and abolishing the domination of one man over another. In the following section, in which I address Marx's treatment of rights in his early work, we will explore these themes further and understand what Marx means when he writes that “only in the name of the universal rights of society can a particular class lay claim to universal dominance,” and that it can only do so at “a moment in which its demands and rights are truly the rights and demands of society itself” (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:184).

2.3 MARX'S CRITIQUE OF RIGHTS

Whether it has been termed a regrettable oversight or something of a scandal, it has been noted that Marx does not seem to justify communism by appealing to rights⁵². Indeed, this supposed indifference to rights is sometimes cited as evidence of the amorality of Marxist theory. But throughout his early work, Marx presents a critique of rights in the modern state that demonstrates the inadequacy of bourgeois rights theory to address the needs of human beings. His rejection of bourgeois rights theory is in fact informed by his view that the satisfaction of human needs and the development and fulfillment of individual persons is the highest aim for human beings. The cornerstone of his critique is that bourgeois rights theory relies on an account of individuals as atomized competitors with rival interests, as well as that it is a holdover from the system of entitlements in feudal society, and functions in the modern state to protect the privilege of the bourgeoisie. This role, Marx argues, is not an accidental one, but rather part and parcel of rights as such. Therefore, rights are an artifact of class society and the conditions of scarcity, competition, and domination that typify relations among human beings under capitalism. They would have no application in a society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the development of all” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:506), nor can they justify the transition to such a society. So much the worse, Marx thinks, for rights.

Marx's first major work after his doctoral dissertation is a critique of Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie*. At the writing of the *Rechtsphilosophie*, designed to be an explanation of the nature of morality, Hegel held that “what is rational is actual”—that is, that the existing Prussian

⁵² Allen Wood, for instance, makes this claim in his 1981 book, *Karl Marx*.

state represented the most rational form of society, and the resolution of all of the contradictions that had propelled the development of history up until its formation; therefore, no further political development was either desirable or possible. In his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx argues that instead of providing an objective account of the nature of right and morality as such, Hegel had merely described the structure of the Prussian state, and asserted it to be the highest level of social organization possible. However, this assertion of Hegel's overlooked the contradictions that still existed within the state. Marx argues:

Hegel is not to be blamed for depicting the nature of the modern state as it is, but rather for presenting what *is* as the *essence of the state*. The claim that the rational is actual is contradicted precisely by an irrational actuality, which everywhere is the contrary of what it asserts and asserts the contrary of what it is⁵³” (*Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.64)

However, it must be emphasized that Marx argues it will be crucial to penetrate more deeply in his assessment of reality than Hegel had—not to sweep Hegel's work aside altogether. Marx regards Hegel's work as extremely fruitful, if not for reasons that Hegel himself had in mind, observing somewhat wryly that “It was a great though unconscious service of Hegel to have assigned modern morality its true position” (*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:108). Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie* did succeed, albeit perhaps

⁵³ Here I have preferred the translation found in the 1970 Cambridge University Press translation of Marx's *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*. Marx's original German text reads as follows: “Hegel ist nicht zu tadeln, weil er das Wesen des modernen Staats schildert, wie es ist, sondern weil er das, was ist, für das *Wesen des Staats* ausgibt. Daß das Vernünftige wirklich ist, beweist sich eben im *Widerspruch* der unvernünftigen *Wirklichkeit*, die an allen Ecken das Gegenteil von dem ist, was sie aussagt, und das Gegenteil von dem aussagt, was sie ist” (*Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels - Werke*. (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin. Band 1. Berlin/DDR. 1976. p.267.)

The *MECW* translates the selection thus: “Hegel is not to be blamed for depicting the nature of the modern state as it is, but for presenting that which is as the *nature of the state*. That the rational is actual is proved precisely in the *contradiction of irrational actuality*, which everywhere is the contrary of what it asserts, and asserts the contrary of what it is” (MECW 3:63).

“Essence” strikes me as a more natural and less ambiguous translation of “Wesen” than does “nature,” which is what appears in the *MECW* translation.

unwittingly, in demonstrating the manner in which the activity of the modern state is given a moral cover and justification. The government of the Prussian state declared itself to be concerned with public affairs, and yet the bureaucracy safeguarded its own interests at the expense of the public. “The Estates are the sanctioned, legal lie of constitutional states, the lie that the state is the people's interest or the people the interest of the state” (Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right', Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.65)⁵⁴. This contradiction between the appearance of the modern state and its actual character belies the claim that it could be rational, and moreover, suggests that in order to make a scientific appraisal of the state, it will not be sufficient to evaluate only its ostensible, stated goals. It will be necessary to examine the real activity of the state, and its actual impact and consequences for the human beings who live and are affected by it.

The core of Marx's analysis of rights is his analysis of the relationship between right and privilege. For Marx, rights are a political expression of economic relations. Because the form that the state takes is determined by the dominant economic form of a society, and by the safeguards needed to protect the privileges of the class upon whom the state is based, there is a tendency to transform into morally significant *rights* what already exist as privileges held by the ruling class. In addition to his critique of the Prussian state, it is largely in reference to the National Assembly of France's 1789 Declaration of the Universal Rights of Man that Marx

⁵⁴ Again, the Cambridge University Press translation is far preferable to the MECW translation. Marx's original German text reads: “Das *ständische* Element ist die *sanktionierte, gesetzliche Lüge* der konstitutionellen Staaten, daß der Staat das *Interesse des Volks* oder daß das Volk das *Staatsinteresse* ist” (Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels - Werke. (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin. Band 1. Berlin/DDR. 1976. p.276) The MECW translation reads: “The *estates* element is the *sanctioned, legal lie* of constitutional states, the lie that the *state* is the *nation's interest*, or that the *nation* is the *interest of the state*” (MECW 3:65). Translating the word “Volk” as “nation,” instead of “people,” is problematic here, as Marx's aim is to distinguish between the state interests and the interests of the individual persons living under the state. To translate “Volk” as “nation” obscures this meaning.

develops his critique of rights, pointing out that the rights of man are historically arisen and contingent, not, as the Declaration asserts, “natural, inalienable, and sacred.”

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

Marx saw, as he had expressed in *The Holy Family*, in the constitutional representative democracy that had been created through the revolution of 1830, the present end-product of the “political expression” of the bourgeoisie of their own class interests, the official expression of their exclusive power, the political recognition of their particular interests⁵⁵.

The right to private property stands out for Marx as the prime example, the “specific mode of existence of privilege, of rights as exceptions” (*Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:109), as the right to property is itself, *jus utendi et abutendi*⁵⁶, the entitlement to exclusive control over material resources, irrespective of the interests of other persons. Similarly, the right to liberty, which is guaranteed by the modern state, is “based not on the association of man with man but rather on the separation of man from man. It is the *right* of this separation, the right of the *restricted* individual, withdrawn into himself. The practical application of man’s right to liberty is man’s right to *private property*” (*On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:162-3). Marx continues:

What constitutes man’s right to private property?

⁵⁵ My translation. The original German text reads: “Marx sah, wie er in der „Heiligen Familie“ zum Ausdruck brachte, im *konstitutionellen Repräsentativstaat*, der durch die Revolution von 1830 geschaffen worden war, das vorläufige Endprodukt der „politischen Aufklärung“ der Bourgeoisie über ihre eigenen Klasseninteressen, den offiziellen Ausdruck ihrer ausschließlichen Macht, die politische Anerkennung ihres besonderen Interesses“ (p.65).

⁵⁶ “The right to use or abuse.”

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

The right of man to private property is, therefore, the right to enjoy one's property and to dispose of it at one's discretion (*à son gré*), without regard to other men, independently of society, the right of self-interest. This individual liberty and its application form the basis of civil society. It makes every man see in other men not the *realization* of his own freedom, but the *barrier* to it. (*On the Jewish Question*, MECW 3:163)

Depicting the rights of man as *human* rights, as the modern state does, obscures their basis in antagonism and egoistic competition. Just as the ancient state had slavery as its economic basis, Marx notes in *The Holy Family* that the modern state is based on capitalism and the man of civil society, i.e., "the independent man linked with other men only by the ties of private interest and unconscious natural necessity, the slave of labour for gain and of his own as well as other men's selfish need" (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:113).

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

As Marx writes in his essay, “On the Jewish Question,” contrasting what he calls merely political emancipation from human emancipation, “The limits of political emancipation are evident at once from the fact that the state can free itself from a restriction without man being really free from this restriction, that the state can be a *free state* without man being a *free man*” (*On the Jewish Question, MECW 3:152*) Here, Marx is referring to the fact that the state may not be a religious state, and yet the citizens of the state may remain in the grips of religion and remain restricted by it. Further:

one should be under no illusion about the limits of political emancipation. The division of the human being into a public man and a private man, the displacement of religion from the state into civil society, this is not a stage of political emancipation but its completion; this emancipation, therefore, neither abolished the real religiousness of man, nor strives to do so. (*On the Jewish Question, MECW 3:155*)

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

go beyond egoistic man, beyond man as a member of civil society – that is, an individual withdrawn into himself, into the confines of his private interests and private caprice, and separated from the community. In the rights of man, he is far from being conceived as a species-being; on the contrary, species-like itself, society, appears as a framework external to the individuals, as a restriction of their original independence. (*On the Jewish Question, MECW 3:164*)

However, Marx's analysis of rights is not wholly negative and does not end with his observation that rights have their historical origin in the need to provide moral justification for existing privileges. Indeed, it is the proletariat's lack of privilege that prefigures a new society,

one from which privilege is totally absent. Workers have no private property that allows them to compel or direct the labor of other human beings, and therefore, Marx argues, no claims that conflict with the ability of other human beings to enjoy access to material resources, if those resources are allocated and employed in a social and rational way⁵⁷. The proletariat satisfies the requirement that “only in the name of the universal rights of society can a particular class lay claim to universal dominance,” and is “a sphere of society [...] claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it” (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:186).

But none of this is to say that Marx does not see a place for the discussion of rights and democratic demands in the pursuit of revolutionary ends. In fact, Marx argues that the appeal to rights plays a progressive role in preparing the proletariat to act as a united power. In *The German Ideology*, Marx even goes so far as to complain that Max Stirner, author of *The Individual and its Property*, wrongly denigrates the role that discussion of rights can play in motivating and convincing workers to seize power, presenting proletarians as a “‘closed society’, which has only to take the decision of ‘seizing’ in order the next day to put a summary end to the entire hitherto existing world order,” when “in reality, the proletarians arrive at this unity only

⁵⁷ Of course, workers often do own small-scale private property such as homes, cars, and so on. However, workers in general tend not to own much more than what is necessary to satisfy their own needs, construed narrowly. I am here contrasting personal private property with private property as capital. Capital is private property that gives its owner the ability to control the activity of others and subordinate it to one's own narrow ends. Workers may own small amounts of private property, but this ownership does not allow them to purchase the labor-power of others or to satisfy their needs by amassing capital. Moreover, workers do not own the means of production or society's natural resources and therefore are not in a position to bar other human beings from having access to them.

through a long process of development in which the appeal to their right also plays a part”⁵⁸ (*The German Ideology*, MECW, 5:323).

Communism is the generalization of the situation of the proletariat, and so the “dissolution of society existing as a particular class is the proletariat” (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:186). While Marx argues that the proletariat has no “particular right,” he does not mean that it has no rights at all, but rather that the rights of proletarians and of people in a transitional socialist society are quite distinct in content from the rights of man recognized in bourgeois society. They are rights which correspond not to the isolated citizen, guarding his private sphere in a world of competition, but rights that correspond to a person who has no claim to private property and who survives and develops through cooperation with fellow persons upon whom he shares a mutual dependence. So it is a stunning oversimplification to state, as for instance George Brenkert does, that “rights are not part of Marx's ethics”⁵⁹. And I also disagree with R. G. Peffer who writes that one of Marx's criticisms “of justice and rights is based on his misconception that *all* moral theories are ideological in the sense that they *invariably* and *necessarily* support the social status quo”⁶⁰ (Peffer, *Marxism, Morality and Social Justice*, p.323). Quite the contrary. Marx states:

When the proletariat demands the negation of private property it merely elevates into a principle of society what society has advanced as the principle of the proletariat, and what the proletariat already involuntarily embodies as the negative result of society. The proletariat thus has the same right relative to the new world which is coming into being as has the German king relative to the existing world, when he calls the people his people and a horse his horse⁶¹.

⁵⁸ Emphasis mine.

⁵⁹ Brenkert, *Marx's Ethics of Freedom*, p.89.

⁶⁰ I disagree on two counts. I do not think that Marx thinks that rights can *never* have a progressive content, and I also do not think that ideology in general is, for Marx, necessarily reactionary.

⁶¹ *Introduction to A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, Cambridge, pg. 142. Emphasis mine.

Nonetheless, Allen Wood, whose 1981 study of Karl Marx's thought has been influential in the discussion of Marx's moral views, also argues that “Marx never claims that [goods such as physical health, comfort, etc.] ought to be provided to people because they have a *right* to them” (p. 127, *Karl Marx*). There is perhaps a certain half-truth to the charge. Marx is not in the habit of making moral appeals to capitalists, that they recognize the human rights of workers and “provide” goods to people. However, he does think that it is the proletariat's very lack of private property that entitles them to a society without private property as a defining aspect of social existence, a society which is not based on a network of competing entitlements.

In later works, Marx argues that increasingly sophisticated economic and social arrangements can give rise to increasingly sophisticated forms of right, until eventually, a society is produced which supersedes rights. Therefore, we will return to the subject of rights in later chapters of the present study.

2.4 MARX'S CRITIQUE OF SEVERAL DOMINANT MORAL THEORIES: CHRISTIANITY, KANTIANISM, AND UTILITARIANISM

Throughout his writings, Marx puts forward a number of critiques of dominant moral theories. Christianity, Kantianism, and Utilitarianism are three such theories which receive particular attention. Marx argues that these moral theories each depend, in one way or another, on a mistaken conception of human nature. Christianity, he charges, sees the realization of human essence not in man's rational, conscious and purposive interactions with the natural and social

world, aimed at the development of his own powers as an end. Rather, it encourages human beings to turn away from the world and to sacrifice. It gives expression to the alienation that human beings experience, but defers the hope for an abolition of human alienation to the “world beyond,” and conceives of that abolition not as a task for humans, but as a task for a supernatural being. Kantianism, Marx writes, depends on a conception of the “free will” that fails to account for the fact that human beings do not form their wills in a purely autonomous way, but do so within historical conditions that play a determining role in shaping their will, though to greater or lesser extents. Marx also argues that Kantian morality accommodates itself too readily to a powerlessness of human beings to intervene effectively into reality. And Marx argues that Utilitarianism substitutes one relation, that of usefulness, for a great, irreducible diversity of human social relations and therefore relies upon a distorted and narrow picture of human social being.

In addition to Marx's criticism that each of these moral theories gets human nature wrong in a significant way, Marx also attacks these moral theories because, in different ways, they serve to legitimize and bolster capitalism. Over the course of the present section, I will discuss Marx's specific arguments for how this is the case.

Allen Wood, in his book, *Karl Marx*, argues that Marx's theory of morality bars him from making substantive moral judgments which would criticize social relations in an actually existing society. According to Wood, Marx sees the role of morality as being purely to uphold and justify the status quo. Wood thinks—and his thoughts on the matter have been all too influential—that for Marx, any application of morality to criticize the existing state of affairs would be outside of the purview of morality (which can only bolster the existing social order) and is therefore

factually incorrect. Wood even attributes to Marx the view that it is not possible to coherently critique *past* social systems.

[...]it is only insofar as moral standards serve the function of sanctioning social relations that they exist. Standards which are at odds with prevailing relations do not fulfill the function proper to moral standards. Hence they must be not only socially impotent but also wrong, because they are at odds with the proper social function of morality. Material production thus provides a basis for moral standards, the only real basis Marx thinks they can have. For Marx, as for Hegel, the morally rational is determined by the socially actual (Wood, *Karl Marx*, p.132).

But Marx might have been somewhat startled to learn that his conception of morality is identical to Hegel's, since he explicitly rejects exactly the Hegelian view that Wood attributes to him. "The claim that the rational is actual," Marx says, "is contradicted precisely by an irrational actuality, which everywhere is the contrary of what it asserts and asserts the contrary of what it is"⁶². In fact, the whole moral outlook Wood ascribes to Marx would have come to him as no small surprise, as Marx regularly makes *moral* criticisms of feudalism and capitalism, as well as criticisms of the moral theories that have been developed at both of these economic stages and served to justify and provide ideological support to them.

For instance, Marx explicitly states that the mutual moral condemnations of the feudal landowner and the capitalist are both legitimate, justified, and correct:

the landowner knows the capitalist as his insolent, liberated, enriched slave of yesterday and sees himself as a *capitalist* who is threatened by him. The capitalist knows the landowner as the idle, cruel, egotistical master of yesterday; he knows that he injures him as a capitalist, but that it is to industry that he owes all his present social significance, his possessions and his pleasures; he sees in him a contradiction to *free* industry and to *free* capital--to capital independent of every natural limitation. This contradiction is extremely bitter, and each side tells the truth about the other. One need only read the attacks of immovable on movable property and vice versa to obtain a clear picture of their respective worthlessness. (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW, 3:286)

⁶² Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right,"* Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.64.

“Movable property claims to have created pure morality,” deriding feudal landed property for being marked by “brute, immoral force and serfdom.” The landowner, on the other hand, complains that the capitalist is a person “estranged from the community who freely trades it away and who breeds [...] pauperism, crime, and the dissolution of all social bonds.” When Marx argues that both of these indictments are true, he can only be appealing to a standard that transcends both of these economic forms. He certainly does endorse, quite explicitly, at least two separate moral criticisms that could not be made if applying only the moral standard of the economic systems they are meant to be criticisms of. So it is only through a tortured interpretation that one could maintain that Marx does not think it is possible to make legitimate moral criticisms of an existing economic system, using moral values that condemn and point beyond it, rather than support and justify it.

Wood's understanding of Marx's conception of morality and its role in society is one-sided and overly simplistic. It ignores that within a class society exists not only the ruling class as a dominant force, but also that class that opposes the society and seeks to overcome it. In the case of capitalist society, the proletariat is itself a material force militating against capitalism and the interests of the capitalist class, and as such has its own ideology, including its own morality, which corresponds to its interests in overthrowing the existing society. Indeed, it is only even possible for the proletariat to transform society at “a moment in which its demands and rights are *truly*⁶³ those of society itself” (*Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, p.140). So not only does the proletariat have its own morality that opposes bourgeois morality, but its morality is objective for all human beings because its interests are

⁶³ Emphasis mine.

consonant with the interests of all human beings. Thus, Marx writes that the proletariat is “a sphere of society [...] claiming no particular right because no particular wrong but unqualified wrong is perpetrated on it” (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:186) It is from this point of view that Marx offers his own criticisms of capitalist society as well as his criticisms of a range of moral theories. Here, I will discuss his criticisms of the moralities which receive the lion's share of his attention in this regard: Christian morality, Kantian morality, and Utilitarianism.

2.4.1 Marx on Christian Morality

While for the purposes of this study, I focus here on Marx's critique of the particular morality espoused by Christianity, Marx's criticisms of Christianity are very much of a piece with his overall critique of religion, as such. Religion, for Marx, is an expression of the alienation that marks human experience in class society. As Marx writes in his 1844 introduction to *The Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, “This state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*”⁶⁴ (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:175). Myths and characters that human beings create appear as forces that exist independently from human beings, and in a complete inversion, are believed to have created human beings. In this way, religion is a symptom of a society in which human beings' labor, and the products of that labor, also confront humans as independent entities, determining their existence quite apart from their own ability to intervene.

⁶⁴ Marx's emphasis.

For these reasons, it is not enough to simply criticize religion or provide proofs of its logical incoherence or empirical falsity, if the conditions of ignorance and oppression that give rise to it are allowed to remain. It is the actual irrationality of human life in class society that gives rise to the irrationality codified in religion. At the same time, religion is also often the only consolation left to the oppressed. Marx's critique of religion is not purely negative; rather, he recognizes that, as he puts it, "the miserableness of religion is at once the expression of real misery and the protest against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people"⁶⁵.

Marx, of course, was not alone among the Young Hegelians in criticizing religion. Ludwig Feuerbach, Bruno Bauer, and even a turncoat such as Max Stirner all devoted a great deal of philosophical attention to the falsity of religion, its reactionary role in holding back human progress socially, intellectually, and politically, and the need for religion to be done away with. What does separate Marx from the other thinkers in his milieu is Marx's argument that the abolition of religion could not be carried out purely in the realm of ideas. The real, oppressive, alienating conditions which give rise to religion and find themselves expressed and reflected in religion would have to be overthrown. Only then could religion fall away. So Marx's specific criticisms of Christian morality must be seen in this light. While religion does itself become a material force that determines social existence once it is believed by human beings, religion is

⁶⁵ My translation from the German, "Das religiöse Elend ist in einem der Ausdruck des wirklichen Elendes und in einem die *Protestation* gegen das wirkliche Elend. Die Religion ist der Seufzer der bedrängten Kreatur, das Gemüt einer herzlosen Welt, wie sie der Geist geistloser Zustände ist." *Karl Marx/ Friedrich Engels - Werke*. (Karl) Dietz Verlag, Berlin. Band 1. Berlin/DDR. 1976. p.378. The standard English Translation in the MECW reads, "Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and also the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions" (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:175). I think the MECW translation of the first sentence here is not especially exact.

not the source of human troubles; rather, it is the other way round. The critique of religion in general and of Christianity in particular is necessary not merely as a tactical maneuver in some ideological battle, but because it demonstrates and reveals what real change is necessary in the material conditions of human beings and in society. “The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly a fight against *the world* of which religion is the spiritual aroma” (MECW 3:175). As Marx writes in his *Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*:

The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses. Theory is capable of gripping the masses as soon as it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp the root of the matter. But for man, the root is man himself. [...] The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that *man is the highest being for man*—hence, with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all relations* in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.... (*Introduction to a Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, MECW 3:182)

Marx's opposition to the particular morality espoused by Christianity is based on the fact that he sees Christian morality as an ethic of servility and self-denial. As such, it is at odds with a moral outlook centered on the development and self-fulfillment of human beings. One of his most thorough criticisms of Christian morality in his early work actually appears as an extended critique of Christian values as they are represented in Eugene Sue's popular 1843 novel, *Les Mystères de Paris*. This is where we will begin.

In the last chapters of *The Holy Family*, Marx critiques the moral lessons drawn by the Young Hegelian Szeliga⁶⁶ from Sue's novel. The novel is about an aristocrat, Rudolphe, who disguises himself as a worker, and “rescues” two working class people from their fates. One of these is Marie, a prostitute who recognizes the inhumanity of her situation, but herself is strong

⁶⁶ This was the pen name of F. Z. Zychlinski.

and “preserves a human nobleness of soul” (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:168)⁶⁷. Marie judges her own moral standing by the extent to which she has helped or harmed other human beings, and judges her situation as good or bad by the extent to which it helps or hinders her in expressing her nature. “She measures her situation in life by her *own individuality*, her *essential nature*, not by the *ideal of what is good*” (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:170).

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

From this moment Marie is *enslaved by the consciousness of sin*. In her former most unhappy situation in life she was able to develop a lovable, human individuality; in her outward debasement she was conscious that *her human essence was her true essence*. (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:174)

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

Marx's excursion into literary criticism is no mere digression. Where Szeliga presents this tale as an excellent bit of moral didactic, Marx means to show that the Christian morality which is supposed to redeem those who abide by it “saves” only by destroying the individual person

⁶⁷ The other is Chourineur, whose rescue Rudolphe accomplishes by inculcating in him a servile manner. This is described by Szeliga as Chourineur's transformation into a “moral being” (MECW 4:163). He becomes dog-like towards his new master, Rudolphe, even going so far as to say that “Je me sens pour vous, comme qui dirait l'attachement d'un bouledogue pour son maître” (MECW 4:164). Szeliga describes this transformation as the restoration of Chourineur to mankind, but really, he has become little more than what Marx refers to as a “moral bulldog.”

who must renounce her earthly existence in exchange for heavenly life. We can recall Marx's discussion of the concrete individual in his doctoral dissertation. It is only in relation to the other concrete objects that exist in the material world that an individual can find development, expression, and existence. Marie's "Christian consolation," then, is precisely the annihilation of her real life and essence—her death" (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:176). The withdrawal from the world is the annihilation of individuality and of being.

It is worthwhile in this context to note Marx's treatment of love which appears earlier in *The Holy Family*. The Young Hegelians inveigh against love on the grounds that it makes "sensuous objects" of human beings. Edgar Bauer wrote, "the beloved is important to the lover only as this external object of the emotion of his soul, as the object in which he wishes to see his selfish feeling satisfied" (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:21). Marx and Engels viciously attack this view. Other human beings, after all, *are* external objects. The emotion of love cannot be denounced simply on the ground that it causes human beings to recognize others as the externally independently existing objects that they are. It is precisely this capacity of human beings to love that helps lead them to an understanding of the external, objective world as something that exists independently of the individual subject. Marx and Engels write, "love first really teaches man to believe in the objective world outside himself" (*The Holy Family*, MECW 4:21). Edgar Bauer complains that in loving another person, the lover wishes to see his "selfish feeling satisfied." But if that is true, then it is this love-relation that allows human beings to see that they must seek their satisfaction outside of themselves and in the world around them. It

causes them to attach importance to human beings. This hardly seems like the worst thing an emotion could be accused of⁶⁸.

For Marx, this is precisely what is of principal value in the relation of love. It is love that allows humans to understand that the satisfaction of their needs *does* lie in other human beings. The other human being becomes an object for his lover, a being with objective, independent reality. This is a basic principle in Marx's moral conception and in his philosophy as a whole. The interaction between, and mutual dependence upon, fellow human beings is what leads to consciousness, language, and in fact forms the entire basis of human social development. In so far as Christian morality teaches us to seek love and approval in an alien god rather than in one

⁶⁸ As a further example of how Marx thinks private property and class society hamper the expression of love as a real recognition of the specific qualities of individuals, and as the treatment of individuals in a way corresponding to their specific qualities, consider his criticism of primogeniture, in *The Holy Family*. Hegel argues in the *Philosophy of Right* that the agricultural class is particularly well-suited to political life because its ethical life is family life, based on the possession of land, and “its particular members attain their position by birth, just as the monarch does” (§305, *Philosophy of Right*). Marx argues that this cannot be, as family life is also the basis of this class's social existence, and therefore it will think of non-familial relations in familial terms. “This class,” he argues, “will apply patriarchal laws to a non-patriarchal sphere” (p.95). The material basis of this class's standpoint, he claims, disqualifies it as a political leader for society.

Primogeniture is merely the *external* appearance of the *inner* nature of *landed property*. [...] The fact that it does not pass to their children in accordance with the “equality of their love for them” frees it, makes it independent even of the smaller society, the natural society of the *family*, and its will and its laws [...]. Hence in the estate which is based on family life, the *basis of family life*, love, as the actual, and therefore effective and determining principle, is lacking. It is *spiritless* family life, the *illusion* of family life. In its highest development the *principle of private property* contradicts the *principle of the family*. In contrast with the *estate whose ethical life is natural*, the estate of family life, it is only in civil society that *family life* becomes the life of the family, the *life of love*. The former is rather the *barbarism* of private property *against* family life (MECW 3:98-99).

Following Hegel, Marx accepts here that love is the basis of family life. However the agricultural class, whose basis, Hegel argues, is family life, actually lacks love as its basis. Primogeniture as the principle by which inheritance is made overrules love relations within the family. The children are provided for not on the basis of specific love-relationships within the family, but rather on the basis of their formal standing, as the first-born son, for example. Primogeniture inverts the relationship between subject and predicate, rendering private property as the subject and “first-born son” as the predicate. “Every first born in the series of landed proprietors is the *inheritance*, the *property*, of the *inalienable estate*, the *predestined substance of his will and activity*” (MECW 3:106). This is, for Marx, an example of how private property prevents the true expression of love and of the nature of the family, subordinating these to property.

another, and to deny the satisfaction of our needs as an important task for human beings, it is inhuman, alienating, and destructive.

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

The social principles of Christianity have now had eighteen hundred years to be developed, and need no further development by Prussian Consistorial Counsellors. The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorifies the serfdom of the Middle Ages and are capable, in case of need, of defending the oppression of the proletariat, even if with somewhat doleful grimaces⁶⁹. The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that the former may be charitable. The social principles of Christianity place the Consistorial Counsellor's compensation for all infamies in heaven, and thereby justify the continuation of these infamies on earth. The social principles of Christianity declare all the vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either a just punishment for original sin and other sins, or trials which the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, ordains for the redeemed. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness, in short, all the qualities of the rabble, and the proletariat, which will not permit itself to be treated as rabble, needs its courage, its self-confidence, its pride and its sense of independence even more than its bread. The social principles of Christianity are sneaking and hypocritical, and the proletariat is revolutionary.

So much for the social principles of Christianity. (*The Communism of the Rheinischer Beobachter*, MECW 6:231)

Beyond the personal costs borne by the individual who practices self-denial and the renunciation of earthly life, there is the role that Christianity has historically played on a broader social scale, as an ideology that preaches accommodation to the status quo and inculcates in the masses of human beings exactly those traits which tend to make them more easily governable by

⁶⁹ I must admit that in light of Marx's remarks, I simply do not understand Nicholas Churchich's complaint that Marx “overlooks the fact that Christianity came into existence centuries before capitalism” (Churchich, *Marxism and Morality*, p.265).

the ruling class and dissuade them from seeking a new social arrangement here on earth. Notice that this article is written in September 1847, only two months before Marx began writing *The German Ideology*, and around the time he is supposed by some to have abandoned moral criticism. Yet, when Marx condemns Christianity for having justified the “vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed,” it takes a special kind of moral tone-deafness not to hear a clear *moral* critique of Christianity, as well as an indication of what values a revolutionary morality, which could be an aid to human liberation, would encourage, namely “courage, self-confidence, and pride.”

2.4.2 Marx on Kantian Morality

*Kant und Fichte gern zum Aether schweifen,
Suchten dort ein fernes Land,
Doch ich such nur tüchtig zu begreifen,
Was ich - auf der Straße fand!*⁷⁰

It is natural to compare Marx's philosophy with that of Kant, who figures so prominently in the German intellectual tradition and whose work provides much of the theoretical backbone for the philosophical justification of classical liberalism. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that the relationship between Marx and Kant's philosophy, and the question of their mutual compatibility, is a repeated theme throughout the critical assessment of Marx's work. Marx himself very rarely mentioned Immanuel Kant by name. But what he does say about Kant is illuminating and allows

⁷⁰ From Marx's early poem, “On Hegel,” written prior to 1837. (Marx/Engels, *Gesamtausgabe*, Abt. 1, Hb. 2, 1929) In English, the text reads, “Kant and Fichte soar to the aether gladly/ Searching for a distant land/ But I only seek to grasp properly/ What I found on the street!” (My translation.)

us to better understand what Marx took to be some of the most important divergences between his own philosophical outlook and Kant's. More broadly, his criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy shed further light upon Marx's criticisms of philosophical idealism as a whole, as well as the contours of his own historical materialism.

Kant's moral theory rests upon his notion of the autonomous, "rational free will." In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that

The will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings in so far as they are rational, and freedom would be this property of such causality that it can be efficient, independently of foreign causes determining it; just as physical necessity is the property that the causality of all irrational beings has of being determined to activity by the influence of foreign causes. (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pg. 52)

This amounts to a negative freedom, out of which emerges a positive freedom of the will to conform itself to the Moral Law. This autonomous will is wholly undetermined by any factors aside from the Moral Law, which it freely binds itself to, thereby subjecting itself to it. It is the fact that the free will legislates this law to itself that is supposed to give the Moral Law its bindingness upon rational actors. The Moral Law can be summed up as one Categorical Imperative, which Kant formulates in various ways, for instance, as a command to "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can, at the same time, will that it should become a universal law" (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pg. 42). Kant also gives it a second formulation: "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to an end" (Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, pg. 38).

On Kant's theory, the good will, so constituted as to be in conformity with the Moral Law, is the only thing that can be good without qualification. Hence, the only proper object of

moral judgement is the will, and actions are moral or immoral only insofar as the will that brings them about is either good or bad. Further, for Kant, for an action to be good, it must be motivated by a sense of duty to follow the Moral Law.

Marx minces no words in his forceful rejection of Kantian morality. In *The German Ideology*, Marx diagnoses it as an ideological symptom of the German bourgeoisie's incapacity in the late 1700s to impose its will upon reality and carry through a bourgeois revolution in Germany, as had been accomplished by the bourgeoisie in France. Marx writes, "Kant's good will fully corresponds to the impotence, depression and wretchedness of the German burghers, whose petty interests were never capable of developing into the common, national interests of a class" (*The German Ideology*, 5:193-4). However, this has not stemmed the tide of interpreters, from Bernstein to Philip J. Kain in his 1988 book, *Marx and Ethics*⁷¹, who have sought to find a home within Marxist theory for Kantian morality. In this subsection, I will explain and assess Marx's critiques of Kantian morality, and discuss why a marriage of their two approaches has seemed appealing. I cannot, in this space, explore exhaustively the reasons for believing that such a marriage is not desirable, possible, nor necessary in order to provide Marxism with a moral content. I do attempt, however, to outline several good reasons for thinking this is the case.

Marx put forward two main arguments against Kantian morality. The first is that because of its focus on the autonomous "free will" and its conformity with the Moral Law as the main issue for morality, Kantian morality fails as a guide for social change. Marx writes that "Kant was satisfied with 'good will' alone, even if it remained entirely without result, and he transferred

⁷¹ In his book, *Marx and Ethics*, Kain aims to show that Marx's moral outlook in his early work is broadly Kantian. He writes, "I hope to show that in many ways Kant and Marx agree and that in a very significant sense Marx is Kantian in his use of the categorical imperative" (p.15, *Marx and Ethics*).

the *realisation* of this good will, the harmony between it and the needs and impulses of individuals, to *the world beyond*”⁷² (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:193). Kantian morality, then, is for Marx a prime example of what he refers to as “impotence in action.” It is a morality that accommodates itself to powerlessness over reality, retreating into the realm of the private and ideal. Furthermore, even regarding this autonomous “free will,” Kant leaves wide open the gap between what “is” and what “ought” to be, arguing that the total conformity of individuals’ wills with the Moral Law can only be realized in the “Kingdom of Ends,” a condition which Kant argues cannot be realized in the material world⁷³.

⁷² Marx's emphasis.

⁷³ Kant has been defended against the first sort of criticism that Marx makes: that Kantian morality is concerned only with the good will and not with actual outcomes. John Stuart Mill, R. M. Hare and David Gauthier are three notable commentators who have argued that the universalization principle amounts to consequentialism, in the end, since to ask whether or not a particular moral principle can be universalized is, these authors argue, just to ask what the consequences of such a moral principle would be.

I don't find this consequentialist reading of Kant very convincing. For one thing, it requires a great deal of doubt in Kant's own descriptions of his moral theory, as he seems to go to great pains to make it crystal clear that on his view, morality is not about ends or results, but rather purely focused on the self-determination of the autonomous will. This point is by no means decisive for rejecting the consequentialist reading of Kant, because he might have been wrong about the implications of the moral theory he developed. Still, I mention this issue because it is one that makes it *prima facie* more difficult to accept the consequentialist reading of Kant.

More significant, I think, is the fact that this reading seems to shift the meaning of “consequentialism” to an intolerable degree. Consequentialism, I take it, is the view that for a particular object of moral judgement, its moral goodness or badness depends on the consequences that result from it. Consequentialists might disagree about what types of consequences matter for the moral goodness or badness of the thing in question. But I don't think they can disagree about whether it matters or not that the consequences under consideration are ones that have any likelihood at all of actually happening. Yet on the type of “consequentialism” that these authors attribute to Kant, that notion would be discarded.

On Kant's theory, in deciding how I should act, I ask myself, What would transpire if everyone else were compelled to act just as I do, and because I have acted in such and such a way? But of course, that such a state of affairs might obtain is scarcely possible to imagine. The question Kant poses has nothing to do with the real consequences of my actions, and the fact that my individual actions may actually have precious little impact upon social practice has no significance whatsoever for the rightness or wrongness of the act about which I am deliberating. Instead, it is a useful device with which to determine whether the act I am contemplating is in conformity with the Moral Law, which is “the objective principle valid for every rational being”, or not. The act turns out to be good or bad not in virtue of its consequences (which may in any case be negligible), but in virtue of its conformity with the Moral Law. So I don't believe that the consequentialist reading of Kant is successful or can defend him from Marx's criticism that his moral theory restricts itself, problematically, to the realm of the ideal, and does not provide a satisfactory treatment of the real outcomes of good or bad wills.

Marx's second argument against Kantian morality is that its focus on the free will belies the extent to which the will is itself determined by material conditions and material interests. The abstraction of the “free will” is illegitimate according to Marx because it attempts to prize apart the intellectual life of individuals from their economic, social, and historical context. A person with a will that is “wholly independent of foreign causes determining it,” to adopt Kant's phrase, simply does not exist in reality, and therefore such a subject makes a rather poor starting point for moral theory. (Later, in 1853, Marx writes, there critiquing Hegel, “Is it not a delusion to substitute for the individual with his real motives, with multifarious social circumstances pressing upon him, the abstraction of “free-will” — one among the many qualities of man for man himself”⁷⁴!)

This latter objection is also of a piece with Marx's critique of political liberalism, a critique that contains his second criticism of Kant's emphasis of the “free will.” Classical political liberalism justifies and explains the authority of the state by maintaining that it is based upon the will of the people. The French Revolution's *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, for instance, states that “Law is the expression of the general will”⁷⁵.

While drawing upon the French Revolution for inspiration, Kant, Marx argues, overlooked the fact that French republican ideas had their basis in specific economic and social conditions, and were developed by individuals whose wills were not “free” in the sense of being wholly undetermined by forces external to it, but rather were forged in specific historical

⁷⁴ Karl Marx, “Capital Punishment” *New York Daily Tribune*, February 17-18, 1853, MECW 11:496-497.

⁷⁵ “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 26 August 1789”, in Philipp Kiiver, *Sources of Constitutional Law: Constitutions and Fundamental Legal Provisions from the United States, France, Germany, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, the ECHR and the EU*, Europa Law Publishing, 2010.

circumstances and whose content changed in response to ongoing political developments. Marx writes:

The characteristic form which French liberalism, based on real class interests, assumed in Germany we find again in Kant. Neither he, nor the German middle class, whose whitewashing spokesman he was, noticed that these theoretical ideas of the bourgeoisie had as their basis material interests and a *will* that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production. Kant, therefore, separated this theoretical expression from the interests which it expressed; he made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeois into *pure* self-determinations of “*free will*”, of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so converted it into purely ideological conceptual determinations and moral postulates. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:195)

The state arises from factors that exist quite independently of anyone's will, and has its basis in the economic and social development of a given society at a certain time. As Marx writes, “The material life of individuals, which by no means depends merely on their “will,” [...] is the real basis of the state” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:329).

One of the earliest and most influential of Marx's interpreters who have argued for combining Kantian morality with Marxist theory is the German social democrat Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein was a member of the German Social Democratic Party and wrote throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, developing his theory of “evolutionary socialism”: a reformist socialism which eschewed revolutionary activity. Bernstein interpreted Marx as an economic determinist who saw communism as the necessary result of a crisis-ridden capitalist society doomed to collapse. However, Bernstein took the relative prosperity of German society at the end of the 1800s to be proof that capitalism would continue to expand, workers' living standards would continue to rise, and therefore it was more preferable for the working class to limit its political program to gradual reforms of capitalism, than to a revolutionary overthrow of it. These gradual reforms would eventually add up to a communist society. But if communism was not inevitable, as Bernstein understood Marx to have assumed, then it would have to be

shown that it was a good moral choice. Since Bernstein understood Marx's theory to be deterministic, he argued that it did not have the resources for a moral philosophy on its own. That moral philosophy would have to be lifted from somewhere—from Kant.

We can already see that there are two important errors in Bernstein's argumentation. The first is that the fact of present economic expansion, taken by itself, by no means invalidates the thesis that capitalism is inherently crisis-ridden, as Bernstein, and no doubt, everyone else in Europe found out not so long after the 1899 publication of Bernstein's *Evolutionary Socialism*⁷⁶. Secondly, Marx never subscribed to the crude economic determinism that Bernstein attributed to him. Although it is true that Marx thought crises were inevitable, he by no means committed himself theoretically to the view that communism was also inevitable.

Karl Kautsky, in his 1906 book, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History*, further develops a Marxist critique of Kantian morality. His work in this regard is largely a response to Bernstein's argument that Marx's theory needed to be supplemented by Kantian morality. Kant argues that the Categorical Imperative is a universal and eternal maxim of reason. In this sense, Kautsky argues, Kant cannot account for the possibility of a future society struggled for on the basis of human solidarity. Kautsky writes:

The “timeless moral law, that man ought to be an end, and at no time simply a means,” has itself only an “end” in a society in which men are used by other men simply as means to their ends. In a communist society, this possibility disappears and with that goes the necessity of the Kantian Programme for the “entire future world history.” What becomes then of this? We have then in the future either no Socialism, or no world history to expect. (Kautsky, *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History*, Charles H. Kerr & Co., Chicago, 1906, pg. 57-58)

⁷⁶ In a similar vein, we can ask whether it is still so easy to accept Eugene Kamenka's 1962 claims that “the Marxian picture of an uncontrolled competitive capitalism propelling itself inexorably towards catastrophic collapse has proved quite false,” or that “The skilled worker has [...] moved slowly but steadily toward a middle-class standard of living [...]; even the living conditions and purchasing power of the shrinking class of unskilled labourers have patently risen and continue to rise” (Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, p.9).

In a communist society, treating human beings as ends would already be embedded in social practices which had developed in the course of a transition from capitalist to communist society. There would then be no need for human beings to bind themselves to a Moral Law which contradicted their own interests and desires, as Kant argues the Moral Law must.

Kantian morality, Marx argues, ignores the ways in which historical, economic, and social factors can play a role in determining human consciousness and in particular, the formation of their wills. It substitutes the autonomous free will for the concrete and worldly human being as a moral agent. On the other hand, Marx also argues that Kantian morality is too easily reconciled to powerlessness over reality, making morality out as purely a question of “the good will,” which is good without reference to its effects.

Kautsky articulates a third point of difference between Marxist and Kantian morality: because Kant thinks that the Moral Law will always contradict human beings' own interests and desires, he does not see morality as a historical phenomenon that can pass away in the course of human social development. Kant instead defers the resolution of this contradiction to the “Realm of Ends,” which cannot be realized except through God.

In this subsection, I have attempted to address a few of Marx's most important criticisms of Kantian morality and to also address the question of whether Marxism is compatible with Kantian morality. I will now turn to Marx's critique of Utilitarianism.

2.4.3 Marx on Utilitarianism

In *The German Ideology*, Marx dismisses James Mill's moral philosophy as the “complete union of the theory of utility with political economy” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:412). He addresses Utilitarianism in the thought of Baron d'Holbach, Helvetius, Jeremy Bentham, and Mill. However, most of his criticism is aimed specifically at Jeremy Bentham, with whom Mill worked closely. In this section, I provide a brief critical reconstruction of Marx's criticisms of Utilitarian moral theory. A completely thorough treatment of Marx's analysis of Utilitarianism lies beyond the scope of the present work⁷⁷ and I do not, for instance, evaluate each of the many forms of Utilitarianism which have been developed in response to objections sometimes similar in spirit to those that Marx raises. I also reserve a treatment of Marx's remarks on the moral thought of John Stuart Mill for the third chapter of this study, as those are most fully developed in later works such as the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*.

Marx's criticisms of Utilitarianism are twofold. On the one hand, he charges that Utilitarianism is incapable of accommodating human individuality in all its concrete aspects, instead grasping the human only in one narrow aspect: as a source or beneficiary of utility. And on the other hand, Marx argues that Utilitarianism functions to justify existing capitalist society (so much the worse, Marx thinks, for Utilitarianism). I will begin by addressing the first of Marx's criticisms.

⁷⁷ An interesting treatment of this subject is to be found in George Brenkert's 1975 paper “Marx and Utilitarianism” (Brenkert, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 5, No. 3 (Nov., 1975), pgs. 421-434). He traces somewhat different themes from the ones I focus on here, as the paper is principally aimed against the specific claim that Marx actually was himself a Utilitarian.

The core of Bentham's Utilitarian theory is what has come to be known as the “Greatest Happiness Principle,” the doctrine that a moral action is good or bad according to the extent to which it maximizes utility, bringing about the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people⁷⁸. According to Marx, Utilitarianism obliterates the unique aspects of different products and different relations between people and reduces them to one thing: utility, or “usefulness”. Utilitarianism, he argues, is tailor-made for a society based on capitalist exchange, in which the particularity of specific products and of the needs of specific persons is dissolved into one mode of expression, that of *money*. Marx writes:

The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation. [...] In Helvétius and Holbach one can already find an idealisation of this doctrine, which fully corresponds to the attitude of opposition adopted by the French bourgeoisie before the revolution. Holbach depicts the entire activity of individuals in their mutual intercourse, e. g., speech, love, etc., as a relation of utility and utilisation. Hence the actual relations that are presupposed here are speech, love, definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals. Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning *peculiar* to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation attributed to them, the *relation of utility or utilisation*. This *paraphrasing* ceases to be meaningless and arbitrary only when these relations have validity for the individual not on their own account, not as spontaneous activity, but rather as disguises, though by no means disguises of the category of Utilisation, but of an actual third aim and relation which is called the relation of utility. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:409)

As I have discussed earlier in this chapter, on Marx's own moral conception, the highest moral aim is the full and free development of rich, “all-sided” individuals. Such individuals have a diversity of needs and capacities which are mutually distinct; there is no “third term” through

⁷⁸ In fact, Bentham eventually abandoned this principle, for reasons we will investigate here shortly. In an unpublished essay on Utilitarianism, Bentham wrote: “Greatest happiness *of the greatest number*. Some years have now elapsed since, upon a closer scrutiny, reason, altogether incontestable, was found for discarding this appendage. [...] Be the community in question what it may, divide it into two unequal parts, call one of them the majority, the other minority, lay out of the account the feelings of the minority, include in the account no feelings but those of the majority, the result you will find is that of this operation, that to the aggregate stock of the happiness of the community, loss not profit is the result of the operation” (Bentham, “The Greatest Good for the Greatest Number,” in *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, John Troyer (ed.)). Bentham assumes that there is a finite amount of happiness to be divided among members of a community.

which the desirability of developing an artistic talent, for instance, can be assimilated to or compared with the desirability of, say, athletic prowess. But Marx argues that Utilitarianism, because it abstracts away from the particularities of real human activities and interactions, is a theory that can neither properly account for the existing full range of human activity, nor help to explain the goodness of further all-sided development.

As I have mentioned, Marx also argues that over the course of its development in the work of Bentham and Mill, Utilitarianism became “a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs, an attempt to prove that under existing conditions the mutual relations of people today are the most advantageous and generally useful” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:413-14). The attack might seem a bit surprising, given that Bentham was well-known for advocating social progress. Bentham argued for a number of social reforms, including increased equality for women and an end to slavery. Those who wonder how Marx can accuse Bentham of apologizing for the status quo should consider Bentham's *Principles of the Civil Code*, with its heartfelt cries against the evils of appropriating private property for the benefit of the masses:

[...] the crimes of the popular party in democracies, have always found apologists. “The greater part of these large fortunes”, it has been said, “have been founded in injustice and that was only restored to the public which had been stolen from the public.” To reason in this manner, is to open an unlimited career to tyranny: it is to allow it to presume the crime, instead of proving it. By means of this logic, it is impossible to be rich and to be innocent. Ought so grave a punishment as confiscation to be inflicted by wholesale, without examination, without detail, without proof? A procedure which would be deemed atrocious if it were employed against a single person—does it become lawful when employed against an entire class of citizens? Can the evil which is done be disregarded, because there is a multitude of sufferers, whose cries are confounded together in their common shipwreck? To despoil the great proprietors, upon pretence that some one of their ancestors acquired their wealth by unjust methods, is to bombard a city because it is suspected that it encloses some thieves. (Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 4)⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Jeremy Bentham, Sir John Bowring (ed.), *Works of Jeremy Bentham, Vol. 1, Pt. 2*, p.320

Bentham relies on some curious arithmetic to reach his conclusion that it is never permissible to violate the sanctity of private property:

[...] the profit of a suppressed place is divided among all, whilst the loss presses altogether upon a single person. The profit spread among the multitude divides itself into impalpable parts; the whole loss is felt by him who supports it alone. The result of the operation is in no respect to enrich the party who gains, but to impoverish him who loses. Instead of one place suppressed, suppose a thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand: the total disadvantage remains the same. The spoil taken from thousands of individuals must be divided among millions: your public places would every where present you with unfortunate citizens, whom you would have plunged into indigence; whilst you would scarcely see a single individual sensibly enriched by these cruel operations. The groans of sorrow and the cries of despair would resound on all sides: *the shouts of joy, if there were any such, would not be the expression of happiness, but of the antipathy which rejoices in the misery of its victims*⁸⁰. Ministers of kings and of the people, it is not by the misery of individuals that you can procure the happiness of nations: the altar of the public good does not demand more barbarous sacrifices than that of the Divinity. (Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 6)

If you were not keeping track, you might think that “shouts of joy” emanating from the majority of human beings might be as good a sign as any that happiness had been maximized. Bentham is on guard against such misconceptions. As he helpfully informs the reader, the joy of the masses *doesn't count*, because it is not real happiness, only the “barbarous,” grasping *schadenfreude* of the have-nots. Bentham is not yet satisfied, however, that he has done quite enough to impress upon the masses the importance of leaving class society just as it is. “I cannot yet quit this subject,” he admits, “it appears so essential, for the establishment of the principle of security, to trace the error into all its retreats.”

Who, then, is the greatest egotist--he who desires to preserve what he has? or he who wishes to take, and even to seize by force, that which belongs to another? An injury felt, and a benefit not felt, such is the result of these fine operations in which the interest of individuals is sacrificed to that of the public. (Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 6)⁸¹

⁸⁰ My emphasis.

⁸¹ Ibid.

This might all just be evidence that Bentham himself was a hypocrite, rather than telling evidence against Benthamite Utilitarianism. But I don't think that is the case. I can only sketch here the kind of argument I think Marx might offer as further support for his claim that Bentham's Utilitarianism is “a mere apologia for the existing state of affairs.” The sketch is inspired by George Brenkert's comment that:

the Utilitarian principle assumes a cleavage between the individual's interests and the general interests. It is for this reason one calculates individual utilities to find what is the greatest good. But it is just this cleavage that Marx condemns as characteristic of class society, and particularly bourgeois society. For man as man, as a species being, there is a harmony of personal and social interests because “he treats himself as the actual living species”. (Brenkert, “Marx and Utilitarianism”, pg. 431)

Bentham's method in determining whether or not it would be permissible to appropriate a piece of private property is to quantitatively measure the pain caused to the erstwhile property-owner, as well as the pleasure brought thereby to the individual members of the public at large. And indeed, if his version of Utilitarianism is true, then this is precisely what he *should* do. But then, what matters in the end to the moral right- or wrong-ness of a particular state of affairs is something like the question, Just how badly do the people in power want to keep things the way that they are and how upset will they be if things are changed? Because if the subjective discomfort of those in power is grave enough, then it turns out, just on this basis, that it is morally wrong to redistribute private wealth. A social question, of how resources ought to be allocated, is neatly converted into a conflict between individual and society. I don't think that Bentham is merely hypocritically twisting Utilitarianism to fit his arguments against the evils of wealth redistribution. He seems to actually be drawing out the real consequences of a moral theory that relies on a frozen snapshot of purely subjective experiences of pleasure or pain. Utilitarianism was first developed, by Helvetius and d'Holbach, in something of a democratic

spirit. By abstracting away from the particular person and focusing on utility, these authors could assert an equality among persons. And as in the quote that Mill attributed to Bentham, Utilitarianism was the call for “everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one”⁸². But that same Utilitarian theory turns out to be profoundly undemocratic in practice.

In this subsection, I have briefly explored Marx's two principal objections to Utilitarianism: that it illegitimately reduces a plethora of human social relations to just one relation of usefulness, and that it serves all too readily as a moral justification of the existing social order.

In the following section, “Utopianism and Scientific Socialism,” I will discuss Marx's and Engels' critiques of a group of philosophers they refer to as the “True Socialists.” Here, I have addressed Marx's criticisms of specific moral theories. I will now go on to explain and assess Marx's arguments against regarding moral theorizing and argumentation as itself an effective means by which to bring about communism. Though morality and other ideological forms of thought play an important role in theorizing a historical situation, Marx does not think that such intellectual pursuits can take the place of revolutionary political action.

⁸² James Mill, “Utilitarianism”, in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, Vol. X, *Essays on Ethics, Religion and Society*, University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Toronto and London 1969, pg. 257.

2.5 UTOPIANISM AND SCIENTIFIC SOCIALISM

In contemporary literature, Marxism is often referred to as a utopian theory. However, both Marx and Engels were very vocal about the distinctions between their scientific and revolutionary method, and the idealist method of utopian socialism. In the second volume of *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels criticize a group of philosophers whom they refer to (mockingly) as the “True Socialists.” Instead of engaging in political activity and looking to the existing economic and social situation to identify which elements in the existing society are in a position to change society, utopian socialists depend on the greatness of an idea to compel people to action through its own intellectual appeal. As Marx writes in *The Communist Manifesto*, utopian socialists:

consider themselves far superior to all class antagonisms. They want to improve the condition of every member of society, even that of the most favored. Hence, they habitually appeal to society at large, without distinction of class; nay, by preference, to the ruling class. For how can people, when once they understand their system, fail to see in it the best possible plan of the best possible state of society? Hence, they reject all political, and especially all revolutionary, action; they wish to attain their ends by peaceful means, and endeavor, by small experiments, necessarily doomed to failure, and by the force of example, to pave the way for the new social Gospel. (*The Communist Manifesto*, MECW 6:515)

The “True Socialists” (Karl Grün, Hermann Semmig, Bruno Bauer, and others) are exemplars of this sort of utopianism, arguing that the communism of Marx and Engels is inferior to their theories because it does not rely solely on moral motivation as a means to bring about communism. Semmig, for instance, argues for socialism as an “anarchic system” which would rely on “the moral core of mankind,” and accuses communists of having failed to achieve “free moral activity.” However, this “moral core of mankind” is left completely unexplained and

undefined. How exactly it would bring about communism in a historical situation in which so many factors militate against it, is anyone's guess⁸³.

The appeal to a “moral core” fails to explain the real process through which socialism might be achieved. In this way, Semmig's *mere moralism* provides cover for a lack of political clarity. The “free moral activity” that he looks to as a way for human beings to effect the transition from class society to socialism is activity undetermined by the real concrete historical situation. Semmig “abandons the real behaviour of the individual and takes refuge in his indescribable, inaccessible, peculiar nature” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5: 465). However, while human beings can imagine themselves as totally free, undetermined beings, in fact, they act in conditions and in circumstances that do not at all depend on their free choice, and their actions are in this way therefore partially determined by external, concrete historical circumstances which must be taken into account in any conception of how communism might be attained.

⁸³ In addition to their critique of Semmig, Marx and Engels also criticize Karl Grün on the grounds that Grün thinks all that is needed to transform human society is for consumers to be educated so as to consume in a “human” way (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:518). Marx and Engels argue that this “moral postulate of *human* consumption” is insufficient as it does not address the “real conditions of production” and the “productive activity of men.” While there are numerous ways in which consumption takes on a distorted character in capitalist society, the idea that society can be transformed through simply lecturing people to consume less is thoroughly implausible. Furthermore, while consumption can be transformed, there is no need to limit overall human consumption because, Marx and Engels argue, production can be improved and revolutionized further so that higher, not lower, levels of consumption are possible and usual. This, they argue, would be possible in a different economic system that was consciously aimed at the satisfaction of human beings. The development and expansion of industry has played an enormously progressive role in human history and brought into existence innovations in production that make it possible for the first time in human history to produce enough for all human beings. The problem is not, at least not primarily or fundamentally, that human beings consume “inhumanly,” but rather, that production is carried out in a wasteful manner and is not itself carried out with the satisfaction of human needs as its organizing principle. Marx and Engels add, “those economists who took consumption as their starting-point happened to be reactionary and ignored the revolutionary element in competition and large-scale industry” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:519).

In his 2002 paper, “Marx’s Critique of the Utopian Socialists,” Roger Paden argues against the kind of critique I am attributing to Marx as a successful critique of moralism. Paden refers to the view that Marx and Engels criticized the Utopian socialists for indulging in mere moralism as the “Strategic Criticism.” Paden writes:

On this interpretation, the Marxist criticism of the Utopian socialists is based on the idea that, while Marx and Engels shared their ends (their vision of the general shape of the ideal society) and were, therefore, Utopians themselves, they believed that the means the Utopian socialists proposed to attain those ends were insufficient. [...] There are a number of problems with this criticism of the Utopian socialists. Perhaps most important, it overestimates the possibility that violent revolution can produce a truly ideal society, while underestimating the power of moral criticism. Moreover, it falsely portrays people as simple victims of the dominant ideology and/or as completely controlled by their narrow economic and class interests. However, this rejection of the power of moral argument to motivate people has been shown to be false by the history of Marxism itself, as it has been moral arguments that have moved many people from a variety of social classes to join this cause. It also underrates the ability of Utopian visions—including Marxist utopias—to cause people to seek political change. History suggests, therefore, that, although small scale utopias are perhaps doomed to failure and although sudden violent revolutions can sometimes succeed, there are no good political reasons to reject in principle gradual, morally-motivated utopianism⁸⁴.

I will address the problems Paden sees in the criticism of mere moralism as a strategy for social change one at a time. Paden’s first objection, that criticizing the Utopian socialists for indulging in mere moralism gets things wrong about the relative efficacy of violent revolution and moral criticism, has at least two problems as far as I can see. The first is that the revolutionary means Marx prefers to mere moralism cannot simply be boiled down to “violent revolution.” Paden effectively indulges in a sleight of hand, replacing what is in Marx and Engels’ writings a description of a long and difficult process, with the idea of a “sudden violent revolution” which Paden invokes as though such an event is to contain within itself all that would be required for a transition to communist society. In doing so, Paden dramatically

⁸⁴ Roger Paden, “Marx’s Critique of the Utopian Socialists” *Utopian Studies*, Penn State University Press, Vol. 13, No. 2 (2002), pp. 67-91

oversimplifies the political program that Marx and Engels promote in their writings and practice in their own political activism. This program includes the organization of masses of people to enter into a political fight for legal reforms, as well as struggles within the workplace for better wages and working conditions, and of course, efforts at political education and the dissemination of revolutionary ideas. It is true that it would be a mistake to assume that *mere* “violent revolution” would be any more effective at bringing about communism than issuing moral commands to society at large would be, but this is also not what Marx is saying and the interpretation on which his critique of Utopianism criticizes the Utopian socialists for their mere moralism need not be committed to such a view.

When Marx and Engels write of the need for revolution, their point is that the radical restructuring of society so that communism can be achieved can only be carried out by the proletariat. Of course, the proletariat does not currently lead society—and so a revolution would be necessary for that class to be in the position of leading humanity. Thus, the argument for political revolution—a transfer of political hegemony from one part of society to another—as a means to achieve communism is tied together with Marx and Engels’ identification of the proletariat as the progressive, existing force within society that can realize communism. Paden would be well within his rights to disagree with Marx and Engels that this is true of the proletariat, but insofar as he provides no argument to that effect, he does not provide adequate support for his decision to dismiss out of hand the idea that revolution might be necessary for communism to be realized, and that mere moralism might not do the job.

Additionally, with respect to Paden’s first objection, Paden seems to overlook that Marx and Engels’ belief that revolution may involve violence is based on the fact that the bourgeoisie

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

Paden’s second criticism of the kind of view I attribute to Marx and Engels is that it wrongly assumes that people’s actions and beliefs are strictly determined by their economic class interests. The idea here is, Who’s to say that a member of the bourgeoisie might *not* be swayed by moral argument alone? But I don’t think that reading Marx and Engels as critics of the mere moralism of the Utopian socialists in any way commits one to the view that moral argument never, in any case, can bring a person to the view that communism is desirable unless she already has economic interests that would be served by it. Certainly, Paden is quite right that historically, people from a range of social classes have been convinced of the need for communism and sometimes through moral argument. And I think Marx and Engels, of all people, were well aware that one need not actually be a member of the working class in order to be convinced of the need for communism. But Marx and Engels do think it is a mistake to advocate mere appeal to human

beings' moral sentiments without taking into account what their economic interests are and whether those interests are better served by the maintenance of the status quo or a transition to a different type of society. To interpret Marx and Engels' critique of mere moralism as a criticism of the view that moral argument alone can bring about communism does not require one to show that no one ever responds to moral reasons even where they go against one's self interest. Rather, the question is whether mere moralizing alone can ever galvanize the majority of society in the way that would be required for a transition to communism, and if Paden thinks that it can, then I think he owes us some argument for it.

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

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

any moral conception whatsoever. Rather, Marx argues that a moral state of affairs is a goal to be aimed at through practical revolutionary activity, not merely wished for in systems of moral injunctions.

2.6 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER TWO

In this chapter, I have attempted to explain the basis for Marx's moral theory in his conceptions of essential human nature, human individuality, alienation, and historical materialism, and to trace these themes throughout his early work. The central question of morality, for Marx, is how alienation can be abolished so that there can be a realization of human essence, and a free and full development of “rich human beings” with an expanding array of needs and powers to interact consciously and purposively with their natural and social environment. With the closure of the gap between human existence as it is and human existence as it ought to be, human “prehistory”⁸⁵ would come to an end and there would begin the history of human beings as freely active beings who regard human social progress and the further development of their powers as their highest aim.

⁸⁵ Later, in 1859, Marx writes: “Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation. In broad outline, the Asiatic, ancient, feudal and modern bourgeois modes of production may be designated as epochs marking progress in the economic development of society. The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation” (Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263-264).

Marx first explains his historical materialist approach in *The German Ideology*. But as early as the *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, we already see Marx combining an understanding that ideas cannot take the place of revolutionary action with an appreciation for the role that ideas do play in promoting such action. There, he writes: “The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, replace criticism by weapons, material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses” (*Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, Cambridge pg. 137).

Between 1840 and 1847, Marx engages in a number of debates about moral questions, including the viability of ethical egoism, the source and nature of rights, and their role in moral theory, and debates about specific moral theories such as Kantianism. Additionally, Marx engages with utopian socialism's emphasis on moral theory as a force for social change, and argues that such a revolutionary element can only be found in a material force: the proletariat, “a class with radical chains.” Marx uses this phrase with regard to the working class's role in the specific situation of Germany in 1843, but with consequences that extend far beyond that particular historical situation. In the *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, he posits the question “Where, then, is the *positive* possibility of a German emancipation?”, and answers:

In the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*. (*Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, Cambridge pgs. 141-142)

In his writings over the course of his life, Marx continues to work out in greater concreteness and detail what this “complete re-winning of man” would consist in, why it is a desirable and necessary aim for human beings, and how the proletariat can lead the struggle for such a universal human emancipation. In the following chapter, I will examine how these themes develop in Marx's work between 1847 and 1857, the period of time after the completion of *The German Ideology* and before Marx's writing of the *Grundrisse*.

3.0 MARX'S MORAL THOUGHT IN HIS WRITINGS FROM 1847 TO 1857

Morality, for Marx, is based on the specific and concrete question of which actions and which social institutions promote the development of the person with an expanding range of capacities who is able to freely and consciously direct her own activity; Marx calls this person, “the rich human being” (“Private Property and Communism,” *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:304). *This person pursues her own development as an end in itself, seeking out new ways in which to express herself in and interact with the natural and social world.* In “Private Property and Communism,” Marx writes that “The *rich* human being is simultaneously the human being *in need of* a totality of human manifestations of life – the man in whom his own realisation exists as an inner necessity, as *need*⁸⁶” (“*Private Property and Communism*,” *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:304).

The moral value of a course of action, a theory, or a state of affairs can be determined by considering whether and to what extent it will promote or hinder this process of self-realization and the production of rich human beings who regard self-realization as a need. This moral conception is therefore based upon a particular theory of essential human nature. Such a theory is necessary in order to speak sensibly of a realization or flourishing of human beings. For Marx,

⁸⁶ Marx's emphasis.

human beings are essentially natural and social beings who satisfy their needs through labor, which is a socially-mediated and conscious teleological interaction with the natural world. In satisfying their needs through the labor process, humans also thereby produce their own social existence as well as alter the natural world of which they are a part.

The labor process in its basic form is a constant in all human societies. It is the essence of all human activity, although it has taken on a different appearance in different places and at different times, giving rise to richly varied social expression (as evidenced in a diversity of languages, art forms, cuisines, and so on) and sometimes appearing in a distorted form, as is the case in alienated labor. And throughout history, human beings have developed increasingly complex and efficient systems for organizing labor (the most sophisticated of which, so far, is capitalist production).

Marx is a moral naturalist in the sense that he believes that an understanding of what *ought* to be can be derived from an analysis of what *is*, and from the historical processes that have given rise to it. As human beings are essentially natural and social beings who produce their own existence through the labor process, Marx proceeds from this conception of human nature to derive a set of closely related claims about what is morally good or desirable. For Marx, that which is morally desirable is that which satisfies human needs, develops human powers, promotes consciousness of ourselves as a species (and the ability to use that understanding in order to act to promote our own welfare), and abolishes the domination of man over man. Each of these are necessary conditions for the abolition of a state of affairs in which human beings are alienated from their essence, and for the historical appearance of “rich human beings,” or as Marx puts it later on in the *Grundrisse*, “the full development of the rich individual.” With the

production of a fully developed communist society in which human beings appear as “rich human beings,” morality would be realized in society's practices and the need for morality as a way to theorize the gap between what is and what ought to be would disappear.

However, the claim that Marx deems moral questions irrelevant in modern-day class society, or believes that morality can only serve reactionary ends, proves to be implausible in the light of a careful appraisal of Marx's thought. Marx does, as we have seen, devote a great deal of attention to criticizing bourgeois morality in its various forms. He also criticizes socialists who believe that moral theorizing is the principal means by which to realize socialism. However, it would be a mistake to confuse these critiques with a rejection of morality, as such. Rather, Marx frequently makes moral criticisms of bourgeois morality and of bourgeois society, itself, outlining how they inhibit the development of “rich human beings”. Marx's view that the development of rich human beings is the highest aim for human beings, and that it is necessary to abolish the alienating conditions of class society and build a society in which human beings pursue the free and full development of their individuality, constitutes a specific moral conception. It is his answer to the moral question, “How ought humans to live?”

The claim that there is a sharp break between Marx's early writings such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The Holy Family*, and his later writings such as *Capital*, appears far less credible once one appreciates how much continuity there is between these two periods and, significantly, throughout Marx's middle period, consisting of works such as *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, and *The Civil War in France*. The notion, espoused especially in the writings of Louis Althusser, that Marx's magnum opus, *Capital* is a strictly amoral and deterministic work, uninformed by moral philosophy in particular

or even by philosophy in general, becomes all the less tenable if we follow the threads of Marx's thought from his early writings, throughout his middle period, and finally, to their expression in *Capital*. In the present chapter, I will demonstrate not only that there is a significant continuity between the moral commitments of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the ideas put forward in writings such as *The Communist Manifesto*, but also that Marx's moral philosophy actually becomes richer throughout the years between 1847 and 1857. As Marx turns more directly to economic, political, and historical research, applying the method of historical materialism, he is able to become more concrete about such issues as the hypocrisy of bourgeois values in an alienating and crisis-ridden society, the historical and anthropological basis for rejecting a conception of human beings as essentially isolated and competitive atoms, and the question of how, why, and under what circumstances non-workers can come to adopt the class standpoint of the proletariat.

I start out in this chapter by addressing the question of whether ideology is inherently reactionary according to Marx. As I have argued before, I do not think that Marx's earlier writings support a purely pejorative conception of ideology of the type G. A. Cohen invokes when he writes that “We might define *ideology* as thinking which is not just incorrect but which is systematically deflected from truth because of its conformity to the limited vision and sectional interests of a particular social class. We could then say that *bourgeois* ideology is thinking deflected from truth because of the service it performs for owners and managers of capital”⁸⁷. Here, I show that *The Communist Manifesto* provides further evidence to support my

⁸⁷ G. A. Cohen, “Are Disadvantaged Workers Who Take Hazardous Jobs Forced to Take Hazardous Jobs?”, in Gertrude Ezorsky, James W. Nickel (eds.), *Moral Rights in the Workplace*, SUNY Press, 1987

reading of ideology as a neutral concept in Marx's work. Marx believed that ideology would be abolished in a fully-developed communist society; however, the existence of ideological forms of thought is a necessary feature of any class society and the revolutionary class can and must make use of ideology in order to wage its struggle.

In Section 3.2, I address several of Marx's moral critiques of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality, as well as his defense of the Communist movement against the moral criticisms of bourgeois ideologists. A significant portion of this section is devoted to Marx's critique of Malthusianism, a theory which captures some of the most hypocritical and reactionary elements of bourgeois ideology and was developed in response to more progressive Enlightenment trends in bourgeois thought. After the discussion of ideology in general in Section 3.1, Section 3.2 provides more concrete examples of how Marx specifically addressed bourgeois morality. It also provides further evidence against the claim, already addressed in Chapter One, that Marx thought it illegitimate to criticize bourgeois society by applying standards that do not themselves serve to justify and uphold it.

Marx's conception of human individuality is what grounds his moral philosophy and his critiques of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality. His approach to individuality is the subject of Section 3.3. The theme of essential human nature plays an important role here, as Marx's understanding of what human individuality consists in is itself informed by his understanding of what human beings essentially are.

That analysis of human nature in turn informs Marx's conception of alienation, and Section 3.4 treats the theme of alienation in Marx's writings between 1847 and 1857. Alienation, in these years after the writing of *The German Ideology*, continues to be an important theme for

Marx. I show that even in works such as *The Communist Manifesto* where Marx does not use the word “alienation,” the concept which Marx earlier denoted with that term continues to play a key role in his moral thought. For this reason, it is possible to trace the development of the concept of alienation throughout Marx's work up through his last writings, as I will continue to demonstrate in the next chapter.

In the penultimate section of the present chapter, titled “Moralism, Sacrifice and Utopia,” I focus on Marx and Engels' “Circular Against Kriege,” in which they argue sharply against sacrifice as a revolutionary value. The appeal to sacrifice, on their account, represents a failure to demonstrate the rationality of revolutionary struggle, and a theoretical step backward from the scientific socialism they have developed. Marx's strongly-worded critiques of sacrifice have received scant attention, but they are extremely valuable for clarifying his own approach to morality.

In the Conclusion, I review the main themes of this chapter and address how they relate to what we have explored in the previous chapter on Marx's early writings, and set the stage for the discussion of Marx's later work in the next chapter, which treats Marx's moral philosophy in his writings from 1858 to his death in 1883. Such themes as alienation, individuality, sacrifice, and a distinction between abstract moralism and genuinely human morality can be traced from Marx's earliest works through the whole of his philosophical corpus. The goal of this chapter is to further demonstrate the continuity of Marx's moral thought and its development throughout his works, as well as to further explore its richness and continuing relevance today.

3.1 IDEOLOGY AND MORALITY

Marx's analysis of the role of ideology is a prominent theme among his earlier works, especially in *The German Ideology*. I have argued that Marx's understanding of ideology is far more complex than some commentators have given him credit for. Marx does not dismiss all ideology as always upholding and legitimizing the dominance of the ruling class. Instead, Marx recognizes that in capitalist society, the bourgeoisie and its class nature play a primary role in shaping the ideas of the age. This does not mean, however, that Marx thinks it is either possible or desirable to function or to think “non-ideologically” in a class society⁸⁸. An ideology is nothing more and nothing less than a system of ideas developed in order to make sense of social contradictions. As such, it is completely necessary that the proletariat develop its own ideology and engage with such ideological forms as morality and political theory. In the *Manifesto*, Marx writes that “the proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:495). For the proletarian movement to be self-conscious is precisely for it to work out, ideologically, its present situation, its aims, and the best means by which to attain its ends.

The question of whether or not Marx eschews ideology altogether is of course of the utmost importance to a study of Marx's moral thought. If Marx regards all ideology as inherently reactionary, then his theory can hardly be supposed to support the view that morality, which is a

⁸⁸ This is the view that R. G. Peffer puts forward in his 1990 book, *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice*. In *Marx and Ethics*, Philip J. Kain argues, against Althusser, that Marx continues to be a humanist after *The German Ideology*, but defends his view by contending that he does “not think that humanism is ideological” (Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, p. 6). As I will attempt to show over the course of this section, I do not think that Marx espouses what would be a premature abolition of ideology, and I do not think that in order to show that an idea or system of ideas is progressive, it must be first established that it is non-ideological.

species of ideology, can have a revolutionary content. In the current section, I will focus on two arguments in defense of ideology. These are both arguments which Marx himself makes in the *Manifesto*, but which received little attention in treatments of this subject. The first argument is that ideology has a potentially revolutionary character and can potentially assist even its bourgeois practitioners in seeing the need to switch their allegiances to the working class. The second argument hangs closely together with the explanation of Marx's historical materialist method. Because ideology is the form in which human beings become conscious of “the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production” and “fight it out,” (*Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263) it would be totally wrongheaded to advocate “non-ideological” modes of thought in a class society.

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

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

that any further human progress can only be achieved through the leadership of the bourgeois class and its institutions, and upon the economic basis of capitalist exchange.

As Marx writes in 1859, it is human beings' "social existence that determines their consciousness" (*Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263). The economic interests of the capitalist class, together with its actual dominance in existing class society, lead its members to confuse wittingly or unwittingly the conditions necessary for the promotion of their class's interests with the conditions necessary for the advancement of humanity as a whole. This tendency can be overcome with a complete change of class allegiance, in which an individual bourgeois or bourgeois ideologist comes to identify with the interests of the working class and attempts to theorize from within the proletariat standpoint. Such an achievement can take place when there is a great preponderance of evidence telling against significant elements of bourgeois ideology together with a personal commitment on the part of the individual person to reflect reality in their thinking as faithfully and as clearly as possible.

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

rightful leader, was revolutionary and progressive in the 18th Century, and now, Marx would argue, deeply conservative, today.

A key feature of bourgeois ideology and of the bourgeois mode of production at its inception, as opposed to the feudal society that it opposed and replaced, was that it gave pride of place to science and to materialism. Rationality, materialism, and a scientific worldview free from the backwardness and superstition of feudalism facilitated the major advances in production that laid the basis for the rise of the bourgeois class. Huge advancements have been made in human beings' theoretical understanding of the world and in their capacity to master it and subordinate it to their ends, all within an ideology that takes capitalist class society to be the highest form of human social organization. As Marx writes in *The Communist Manifesto*, “Whereas past industrial classes depended on maintaining production unchanged, the bourgeoisie must constantly revolutionize production and therewith, society” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:487). And it is capitalism and the need of the bourgeoisie to constantly change and revolutionize society which have in turn produced a need for higher levels of human consciousness and made it possible for human beings to have a more accurate and scientific knowledge of their social existence than was possible in previous class societies. In Marx's words, the bourgeoisie has removed the “sentimental halo” from relations of exploitation and “Man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:487).

However, although that interest in science remains an important part of bourgeois thought today, it exists often in a narrow or distorted form, and frequently takes a backseat to this class's historical need to compromise with feudal and religious forces and/or to defend itself against

working-class challenges to its rule. Whereas opposition to religion was once a defining aspect of bourgeois ideology, religious mysticism now finds itself quite at home within it. The Enlightenment ideal which held up science as a form of thought and practice in which the deepest and most fundamental questions could be answered through the work and intelligence of human beings, has given way to a conception of science as merely the art of manipulation, divorced from a deeper inquiry into the nature of reality⁸⁹.

Bourgeois ideology is by no means a form of consciousness that exists only among members of the bourgeoisie or among its ideologists. As Marx wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*, “The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class,” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503) and not only does the ruling class hold these ideas, but throughout the history of a class society, it is usually the case that *most* of its members also hold those ideas. These ideas are developed and promulgated by the ruling class in large part because they bolster the reign of that class, and the ruling class has the best infrastructure at its disposal to disseminate those ideas. But this alone is not enough to ensure broad assent. In a capitalist society, bourgeois consciousness finds widespread acceptance in large part because it actually does reflect and explain, if only in a distorted and limited manner, the world in which members of that society find themselves. As Marx writes in *On the Poverty of Philosophy*:

[S]ocial relations are just as much produced by men as linen, flax, etc. Social relations are closely bound up with productive forces. [...] The same men who establish their social relations in conformity with the material productivity, produce also principles, ideas, and categories, in conformity with their social relations. (*The Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6:165-166)

⁸⁹ Georg Lukács illuminates this point in his work, *Zur Ontologie des gesellschaftlichen Seins*. See the Introduction and the section on positivism in Chapter 1, pp. 325-371.

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

But don't wrangle with us so long as you apply, to our intended abolition of bourgeois property, the standard of your bourgeois notions of freedom, culture, law, &c. Your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property, just as your jurisprudence is but the will of your class made into a law for all, a will whose essential character and direction are determined by the economical conditions of existence of your class. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:501)

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

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

There is a continual movement of growth in productive forces, of destruction in social relations, of formation in ideas; the only immutable thing is the abstraction of movement – *mors immortalis*⁹⁰. (*Poverty of Philosophy*, MECW 6:166)

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

When people speak of the ideas that revolutionise society, they do but express that fact that within the old society the elements of a new one have been created, and that the dissolution of the old ideas keeps even pace with the dissolution of the old conditions of existence. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503)

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

⁹⁰ Note from MECW: “Marx quotes these words from the following passage of Lucretius's poem *On The Nature of Things* (Book III, line 869): “mortalem vitam mors cum immortalis ademit” (“when mortal life has been taken away by immortal death”).”

Marx's views with regard to the potentially progressive role of ideology are most clearly expressed in his remarks on the phenomenon of bourgeois ideologists who shed their class allegiance to the bourgeoisie and join the proletariat in its struggle. As I discussed in the last chapter's treatment of the proletarian standpoint, for Marx, the reality of the historical situation under capitalism is most clearly appreciated from the point of view of the proletariat, but is by no means accessible only to actual proletarians. It is possible in principle for any person to adopt this standpoint and to identify with the aims of the working class. In these cases, members of other classes, for instance, of the bourgeoisie or petty bourgeoisie, recognize that the proletariat is the force in society capable of advancing the interests of humanity as a whole. Marx describes this process in the *Manifesto*:

Finally, in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the progress of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of old society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, and in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:494)

As I mentioned earlier in the present section, at least two factors come into place in cases where members of the bourgeoisie join the proletariat: 1) a preponderance of evidence emerges which throws fundamental tenets of bourgeois ideology into question, and 2) a commitment on the part of the individual person to the pursuit of truth and, we can add, to the continued existence and development of humanity. Here, both of these factors figure prominently in Marx's description of how members of a ruling class may go over to the side of a revolutionary class, and of how such defections took place in the conflict between feudal nobility and the bourgeoisie, and now take place in the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In a time of crisis, bourgeois

ideology, and its commitment to the necessary and desirable permanence of capitalist society and of the bourgeoisie's leadership of humanity, becomes increasingly difficult to maintain alongside a commitment to understanding reality. As the contradictions within capitalist society become more “violent” and “glaring,” it becomes easier to see that a continued existence and development for human beings will require a fundamentally different type of society in which these glaring contradictions have been resolved.

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

Were it the case on Marx's view that ideology is always false consciousness, and always obscures reality, it would be impossible to make good sense of Marx's statement that “in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologists” become radicalized in great part through their own theoretical work and ability to capture and reflect a historical moment in which the victory of the proletariat is required in order for human progress to continue. Additionally, Marx also writes that as members of the bourgeoisie switch allegiances and join the working class, this provides the proletariat “with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:494). This underscores the point that not all bourgeois thought is inherently reactionary; rather, what is valuable and progressive in it can be incorporated and

further developed in proletarian ideology, and in a socialist society, in a way that is no longer possible in a society based on capitalist relations of production.

This brings us now to the second argument in defense of ideology: because ideology is the form in which human beings become conscious of “the existing conflict between the social productive forces and the relations of production” and “fight it out,” (*Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 29:263) it is simply wrongheaded to expect there to be an abolition of ideological modes of thought in a class society, and Marx does not make this mistake.

Famously, Marx envisions a future society in which ideological forms such as morality and religion would be abolished. Communism is the theory of the existing elements within capitalist society that aim to produce a new society based on democratic control of society's resources, the satisfaction of human needs, and the development of human powers. But the society aimed at in Communism is not merely a new form of class society with the proletariat as the ruling class: rather it is the abolition of class society altogether and with it, class domination and class struggle. Communism does not propose for this new society a new moral, political, or legal order because these forms of thought have their basis and their application in class society, where they express the class struggle and function as ideological weapons with which to wage it. For Marx, ideological forms of thought would indeed cease to exist in a fully-developed communist society. However, this does not mean that Marx thinks it is either possible or desirable to think “non-ideologically” in the present instance.

At the moment, we still live in class society and the working class must wage its struggle within it. Marx does not argue that moral theory, philosophy, political science, and so on are

already impotent and outdated. Nothing could be further from the truth, as he himself engages in exactly these forms of thought. Moreover, because a transitional socialist society would also be a class society, there, too, the working class would use ideology in order to theorize its historical situation and to assert its leadership in society⁹¹. However, this form of ideology would differ greatly from bourgeois ideology. As Marx asks (rhetorically):

Does it require deep intuition to comprehend that man's ideas, views, and conception, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life? What else does the history of ideas prove, than that intellectual production changes its character in proportion as material production is changed? (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503)

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

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

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

⁹¹ Kai Nielsen, in his 1989 book, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, observes correctly, I think, that morality “works to get people to accept the established order or, where it is a revolutionary ideology, to accept a new postulated revolutionary social order. It typically serves ruling class interests although sometimes it can also be an ideological weapon of a rising class in its struggle with the dominant class” (Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, p.109).

truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience.” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504)

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

What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, *viz.*, the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms. The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involved the most radical rupture with traditional ideas. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504)

Since social consciousness is determined by historical reality, it is entirely to be expected that societies conditioned primarily by class conflict would have certain ideas in common. But Communism is a movement which abolishes class society and seeks to produce a new society based not on class conflict but on human solidarity. “In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms,” Marx writes, “we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:506). Marx does not think that a future communist society would produce a new moral code since, firstly, it would already be a society based on the needs of

human beings and secondly, it would be developed, as Marx argues, out of a long revolutionary process in which values such as solidarity would become realized in normal human practice through habituation and education. This does not mean that at present, in our class society, there is not genuine morality, genuine moral facts of the matter about what human beings ought to do, or the resources to make factive moral judgements about existing states of affairs. A world in which class antagonism exists is a world that still has a place for genuine morality. Not only is there a role for morality in capitalist society, but Marx also believes there will be a role for morality in a transitional socialist society, as well, even as the gap between what is and what ought to be grows smaller.

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

It should be noted that Marx readily accepts the interlocutor's charge that Communism seeks to abolish political science, among other ideological forms of thought. And it goes almost without saying that Marx thought it was important to carry out theoretical work in politics as an

aid to revolutionary action. The subtle point lies in understanding that one of the goals of Communism as a theory and as a movement is to use political means to abolish man as a political animal and to abolish the basis for politics altogether. “In the beginning,” Marx writes, “this cannot be effected except by means of despotic inroads on the rights of property” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504-5). However, over time, as class distinctions disappear, “the public power will lose its political character” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 6:505) and the proletariat will have “abolished its own supremacy as a class.” The desired end is a society without politics and class domination. The prescribed means are political organization and what Marx refers to as the democratic dictatorship of the proletariat.

In much the same vein, philosophy is a necessary tool in order to bring about a world in which philosophy no longer exists as a separate, specialized enterprise divorced from man's everyday existence. And similarly, as long as there is a gap between how human beings ought to relate to one another, and how they actually do relate to one another, there will continue to be a role for a genuine human morality and for moral theory in working out answers to the questions, “What ought we to do?” and “How ought we to live?” The need for this role to be filled can only disappear in a future Communist society based on the needs of human beings and in which human beings have interactions with one another which are based on relations of human solidarity. But at the moment, there is still plenty of need for moral theory.

In this section, I have used the writings of Marx's middle period, particularly *The Communist Manifesto* and *On the Poverty of Philosophy*, to further develop and extend a treatment of Marx's conception of ideology. In seeking to understand Marx's conception of ideology—its origins, its development, and its eventual abolition—it is important to read his

comments about ideology in the light of his historical materialist method. Marx sees non-ideological thought as the desirable product of a fully-developed communist society. However, he also shows that such thought can only be produced through a thorough transformation of society's relations of production. For his critique of ideology to take the form of a command that people think non-ideologically today, in a class society, would be an example of exactly the sort of idealist and utopian voluntarism that he rejects.

I have argued that in the years following the completion of *The German Ideology*, Marx continues to make criticisms of bourgeois society that are part of a moral critique of capitalism based on its failure to promote the full and continued development of the human individual. In the following section, I will examine these criticisms further and show how they are consistent with and further develop Marx's conception of ideology.

3.2 MARX'S MORAL CRITIQUES OF BOURGEOIS SOCIETY AND BOURGEOIS MORALITY

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

Marx, "Wage Labour and Capital," 1847

I have demonstrated elsewhere that in Marx's earlier work leading up to and through *The German Ideology*, it is impossible to maintain, as for instance Allen Wood does, that Marx thought it was always invalid to make moral criticisms of a society according to standards that do not serve to uphold that society's economic system or the interests of its ruling class. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx continues to make moral criticisms of capitalist society and its intrinsic aims, and he does so here on the same basis as before: capitalism degrades the human being, limits the satisfaction of his needs, and stunts the development of his powers. The question of which things enrich human beings and contribute to the development of their capacities as all-sided beings and which things degrade human beings is at the basis of Marx's moral outlook. In the *Manifesto*, and in the documents he produces immediately before it, such as the 1847 "Wages," Marx does not shy away at all from making moral critiques of the bourgeoisie's role in society and of bourgeois morality's function in legitimizing that role.

Marx's criticisms of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality in the years between 1847 and 1857 fall into two broad categories. On the one hand, there are Marx's criticisms of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality, proper. Marx criticizes bourgeois morality on the basis that it is tied to the preservation of bourgeois rule and the political and economic status quo, and that this status quo is itself immoral insofar as it stunts the development of human individuality and the expression of human essence, while it is possible to change this society and thereby alleviate the social ills brought about by capitalism. Marx emphasizes that bourgeois morality is a particular historical form that will pass away along with the abolition of its material basis, the capitalist mode of production. Here, I examine three critiques Marx puts forward of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality. The first is a critique of Malthusianism. The second

is Marx's criticism of working conditions under capitalism. And the third is Marx's argument that the bourgeoisie is simply unfit to rule based on an objective standard of fitness.

On the other hand, Marx responds to the moral criticisms that bourgeois ideologists level against communism. Those criticisms range from communism's supposed failure to value the individual, to its disregard for bourgeois family values. Here, Marx focuses largely on the hypocrisy of these charges.

In addition to these critiques of bourgeois society and bourgeois morality, and his refutations of bourgeois moral criticisms of communism, Marx also engages with several questions of applied ethics. I will discuss those here and examine the type of reasoning that Marx applies to questions such as capital punishment, showing that his reasoning there is a consistent application of his moral theory based on human individuality. I will begin by discussing Marx's critique of Malthusianism.

Thomas Robert Malthus's 1798 volume, *Essay on the Principle of Population*, was written as a response to the view held by Enlightenment thinkers such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Thomas Godwin, and others, that society and human beings were capable of considerable future progress towards a fully rational society. Godwin, one of Malthus's principal targets, opposed the idea of a fixed human nature, arguing that with a change in the structure of society, there could also be produced significant changes in human beings themselves. Malthus aimed to show that such significant progress was impossible, taking aim at Enlightenment aspirations for a better and more rational society. Malthus claimed instead that the human population would grow exponentially and in doing so, put such strain on humanity's resources that overall, life would only become nastier, more brutish, and shorter. The situation could be ameliorated somewhat,

Malthus offered, through abstinence from procreation, especially among the poor. Indeed, Malthus claimed that exponential population growth was produced by God so that human beings would be forced to learn such virtues as abstinence and restraint. According to him, it would always be the case that population growth would outstrip the resources available to satisfy the needs of society, and thus it was not possible to improve society by increasing production, since the population would always increase to catch up with and eventually outstrip it.

In “Wages,” Marx targets Malthus's claim that world overpopulation is the cause of widespread poverty, as well as the promise of increased wages and marginally improved living conditions for the worker, if only the worker will limit his reproduction and cease to add to the “oversupply” of labor. Marx attacks what he refers to as the “utter stupidity, baseness⁹² and hypocrisy of this doctrine” (“Wages”, MECW 6:428). Malthusianism's advice to the worker is “stupid” because it is so totally impracticable. In fact, Malthus himself admits this and it constitutes part of the grounds for his pessimism about the possibility of greatly and permanently improving conditions for human beings.

Malthusianism is also hypocritical because the bourgeoisie cannot possibly desire for the working class to become smaller, since, as Marx writes:

Big industry constantly requires a reserve army of unemployed workers for times of overproduction. The main purpose of the bourgeois in relation to the worker is, of course, to have the commodity labour as cheaply as possible, which is only possible when the supply of this commodity is as large as possible in relation to the demand for it, i.e., when the overpopulation is the greatest. (“Wages”, MECW 6:433)

Even if it were the case that unchecked population growth was the cause of poverty, it would be impossible to address this effectively in an economic system that relies precisely on

⁹² “*Niederträchtigkeit*,” in Marx's German.

there being many more workers than there are jobs. It could only be addressed by overthrowing that system, but of course, this is not what the bourgeois intends when he adopts Malthusianism as an explanation of social woes, neither is it what Malthus himself prescribed, preferring instead to lay the blame for this suffering at the feet of the poor and their failure to be more sparing in their procreation.

This leaves us with the question of why Marx finds Malthusianism to be “base.” Malthusianism is “base” because it places the moral blame for the worker's miserable condition upon the worker himself. If only the worker exerted greater self-control, the Malthusian can think, he would not be in such a sorry condition. It gives the bourgeois a license to observe widespread privation not as a product of capitalist society which could potentially be done away with, but rather as the natural and necessary, if lamentable, condition of human beings. As Marx writes, Malthusianism:

is the more welcome to the bourgeois as it silences his conscience, makes hard-heartedness into a moral duty and the consequences of society into the consequences of nature, and finally gives him the opportunity to watch the destruction of the proletariat by starvation as calmly as any other natural event without bestirring himself, and, on the other hand, to regard the misery of the proletariat as its own fault and to punish it. To be sure, the proletariat can restrain his natural instinct by reason, and so, by moral supervision, halt the law of nature in its injurious course of development. (“Wages”, 6:433)

To relate this back to one of the main themes of this section, it is important to notice here that Marx is more than happy to reject a theory precisely on the basis that it merely serves to justify and uphold existing capitalist social arrangements which, in the light of how they needlessly damage or destroy a large section of humanity, are unjustifiable. The aim of Malthusianism as a doctrine is to lower expectations about what kind of society it is possible for human beings to achieve, and to thereby provide justification for the existing society with all of its faults. If the

optimism of figures such as Rousseau and Corcorret represented some of the most progressive elements of bourgeois ideology, Malthusianism captures its conservative side that has reconciled itself to the limits of capitalist production. As Nicholas Churchich writes in his 1994 book,

Marxism and Morality:

A movement of thought originating from Darwin's theory of evolution and inspired by writers like Malthus and Spencer gradually became a significant intellectual force destined to play a considerable role in the second half of the nineteenth century. This movement of thought was expressed in Social Darwinism which was essentially an attempt to justify the existing individualistic *laissez faire* and competitive system of class society. Both Marx and Engels reject the ideology of Social Darwinism [...].

Social Darwinism, Marx contends, is characterised by the evils of unrestricted private enterprise. Instead of treating society as the organisational means by which men cooperate in the tasks of promoting their social and moral ends, Social Darwinists reduce it to the Hobbesian state of '*bellum omnium contra omnes*'. (Churchich, *Marxism and Morality*, p. 229).

Marx's critique of Malthusianism is no mere historical sidenote. Rather, it provides us with an important source of insight into Marx's criticisms of bourgeois morality more generally. Marx's principal charge against Malthus is that he exonerates capitalist society in its role in producing human misery, and closes the theoretical space for a systematic critique of capitalism by putting in its place a set of moral demands aimed at the poor and designed to blame them for their own suffering. This tactic is by no means the monopoly of Malthusianism, and in fact Marx criticizes Christian morality among other forms of morality for performing the same exculpatory task for bourgeois society. Also, Malthusianism is by no means a historical relic, and strong echoes of it can be heard today in the rhetoric of welfare reform, in certain corners of the environmentalist movement, and in other sectors all across the political spectrum. I will say more about Malthusianism in the next chapter, as it is a topic that Marx returns to in later works such as *Capital*.

In addition to criticizing the expression of bourgeois morality in theories such as Malthusianism, Marx also levels moral criticisms against the capitalist mode of production, itself. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx describes the worker's situation under capitalism as a type of slavery, crystallizing into one word the extent to which labor under capitalism is a yoke and an affront to the worker. He writes:

Masses of labourers, crowded into the factory, are organised like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants. Not only are they slaves of the bourgeois class, and of the bourgeois State; they are daily and hourly enslaved by the machine, by the overseer⁹³, and, above all, by the individual bourgeois manufacturer himself. The more openly this despotism proclaims gain to be its end and aim, the more petty, the more hateful and the more embittering it is.⁹⁴ (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:491)

The worker faces the naked domination of capital from its representation in the capitalist state all the way down to individual capitalist, a despotism which is “petty, hateful, and embittering” because its aim is nothing higher than mere capitalist accumulation—an end that cannot justify the injury done to human beings in order to achieve it in a time when, as Marx believes, capitalism has outlived its usefulness to humanity and it is now possible to develop a more rational society. I do not think we can read Marx's use of the word “hateful” here as morally neutral. Marx uses starkly normative language here to drive home how objectionable the capitalist system, the capitalist division of labor, and the character of that labor, truly is.

Marx goes beyond a mere statement of capitalism's odiousness to provide an objective standard of a class's fitness to rule: a standard which capitalism fails to meet. In order for a class to be fit to rule, Marx argues, that class's conditions of existence must permit the

⁹³ “Overseer” would be a better translation here.

⁹⁴ The statement is no less normative in its original German: “Diese Despotie ist um so kleinlicher, gehässiger, erbitterter, je offener sie den Erwerb als ihren Zweck proklamiert.” Historical materialism takes human production and the circumstances in which it takes place to be fundamental in conditioning human existence.

continued existence of society as a whole. On this standard, the bourgeoisie is unfit to rule because it cannot even guarantee to its “slaves” (the proletariat) so much as a continued slavish existence. Marx writes:

[T]he bourgeoisie is unfit any longer to be the ruling class in society, and to impose its conditions of existence upon society as an over-riding law. It is unfit to rule because it is incompetent to assure an existence to its slave within his slavery, because it cannot help letting him sink into such a state, that it has to feed him, instead of being fed by him. Society can no longer live under this bourgeoisie, in other words, its existence is no longer compatible with society. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:495-6)

It follows, then, that the state of alienation that Hegel proposed to solve in an idealist way in his dialectic of Lordship and Bondage is no static state, but rather a dynamic one which the slave cannot resolve simply by accommodating himself to his situation at an ideal level. For Hegel, the slave feels himself alienated in his condition, one in which his labor does not belong to him. He eventually comes to understand, however, that the master's existence depends upon him. He produces the master, and thereby, produces his own slavery and his own condition. Once the slave recognizes that he has produced and is continually producing his master's existence, as well as his own, and the relationship between him and his master, he no longer feels alienated, and recognizes himself in his situation. However, the actual slave relation remains untouched—all that has changed is the slave's *ideas* about his situation. In reality, however, the worker in his modern-day slavery cannot continue his enslaved existence produced by capitalist society, however idealistically reconciled he might become to it, because there is a constant downward pressure on his standard of living until it ultimately threatens his continued survival.

Marx observes that in the relationship between bourgeoisie and proletariat, the relations do not remain static and tenable, as they are assumed to be in Hegel's dialectic of lordship and bondage. Rather, the proletariat constantly sinks deeper and deeper into poverty and loses its

ability to maintain its own existence, much less produce the existence of the bourgeoisie. It is upon this basis that Marx derives a standard of fitness for a class to rule. Because the bourgeoisie's conditions of existence will lead to the disintegration of society altogether, it is unfit to rule society. The slave cannot even continue his slavish existence in capitalist society. The choice for the proletariat becomes, then, either to overthrow the existing society and to impose the working class's conditions of existence—its lack of private property and its participation in labor—as a law for society, or to be extinguished in a time of crisis, “dragged into the grave” along with his master.

In addition to criticizing bourgeois morality and bourgeois society themselves, Marx also responds to a series of moral charges made against Communism. He does this by exposing the hypocrisy of these charges and also by demonstrating how empty the principles they are based upon are even within capitalist society. Here I will address just a few of these charges, and Marx's responses to them. It should be noted from the start that if Marx eschewed morality as such and thought that it was always reactionary, he could have made much quicker work of these criticisms. He might have simply said that there is no morality, that nothing is actually morally right or wrong, but merely either economically and historically determined or not, and that therefore the moral objections are completely without traction. But he does not say this. Instead, he shows that bourgeois society itself fails to meet the lofty standards of its own bourgeois morality. He goes on to criticize the standards themselves, and in the process he levels moral condemnations of bourgeois morality and the role it plays in bolstering the rule of the capitalist class.

Marx's bourgeois interlocutor argues that the abolition of private property will do away with individuality. Marx argues that the bourgeoisie accuses communism of doing away with “individuality,” but it can really only mean that communism does away with the bourgeois owner of property. In fact, as I already discussed in the previous chapter, the development of human individuality is the principal value in Marx's communist theory. So Marx writes:

From the moment when labour can no longer be converted into capital, money, or rent, into a social power capable of being monopolised, *i.e.*, from the moment when individual property can no longer be transformed into bourgeois property, into capital, from that moment, you say, individuality vanishes.

You must, therefore, confess that by “individual” you mean no other person than the bourgeois, than the middle-class owner of property. This person must, indeed, be swept out of the way, and made impossible. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:500)

“Individualism” may well be a convenient and ubiquitous buzzword in capitalist society, but in reality, human beings under capitalism live a limited existence in which their individuality is more hampered and stunted rather than it is expressed and developed. Marx writes that “in bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:499). The bourgeois person, as an owner of capital, is able to have what Marx refers to earlier in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* as the “semblance” of a human existence. Money allows him to satisfy his needs and develop his powers, to whatever extent is possible in society under capitalism. But as Marx writes, in capitalist society, “private property is already done away with for nine-tenths of the population; its existence for the few is solely due to its non-existence in the hands of those nine-tenths.” The vast majority of human beings do not have access to capital and therefore do not have access to even this semblance of a human existence and a developed individuality. For that to happen, Marx argues, would require the abolition of private property

and the society that corresponds to it. Then, in a society based on democratic control of society's resources, aimed at the development of human beings, it would be possible for human individuality to be developed on a society-wide scale. Human individuality would not be destroyed, but rather promoted and developed to an extent that is impossible to achieve upon the basis of capitalist relations of production.

Marx deploys an important distinction here between “individual property” and “bourgeois property.” Bourgeois property is a form of property in which it is possible for one segment of society to enjoy exclusive ownership of resources such as land, fossil fuels, factories, etc. which are necessary for the production of goods which satisfy the needs of all human beings in the whole society. Since this type of ownership excludes the majority of society from having a share in the forces of production, it compels them to sell what they do own that would be useful to the capitalist—their labor—in order to earn the money that would allow them to satisfy their needs through purchasing some of the products. It is this system that Marx wants to abolish. Individual property, on the other hand, is simply a result of the fact that in performing labor, human beings appropriate natural resources. Whereas under capitalism this individual property is transformed into capitalist private property, in socialism, as Marx later writes in the first volume of *Capital*, there would be a “transformation of capitalistic private property, already practically resting on socialized production, into socialized property” (*Capital*: MECW 35:751).

Continuing his defense of communism and exposé of the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality, Marx turns to the question of what we might now refer to, albeit somewhat anachronistically, as “family values.” Here, he discusses two very closely related bourgeois moral criticisms of communism. The first, is that communism would abolish marriage and

introduce “community of women.” The second, is that communism would abolish the bourgeois family.

In leveling the first charge, the bourgeois “ridiculously,” Marx says, displays a “virtuous indignation” at a supposed “community of women” to be introduced under communism. Again, Marx raises a two-pronged attack, criticizing the hypocrisy inherent in the institution of bourgeois marriage under capitalism, and going on to show how the charge gets things wrong about what life under communism would be like. We can find the origins of this argument in the document that *The Communist Manifesto* was based upon in part: Frederick Engels' “The Principles of Communism,” written in 1847 as a draft program for the Communist League⁹⁵. There, Engels suggests an answer to the question, “What will be the influence of communist society on the family?” He answers:

It will make the relation between the sexes a purely private relation which concerns only the persons involved, and in which society has no call to interfere. It is able to do this because it abolishes private property and educates children communally, thus destroying the twin foundation of hitherto existing marriage--the dependence through private property of the wife upon the husband and of the children upon the parents. Here also is the answer to the outcry of moralising philistines against the communist community of women. Community of women is a relationship that belongs altogether to bourgeois society and is completely realised today in prostitution. But prostitution is rooted in private property and falls with it. Thus instead of introducing the community of women, communist organisation puts an end to it. (Engels, *Principles of Communism*, MECW 6:354)

Engels' insights are further developed in *The Communist Manifesto*, where we find the following passage about marriage and the status of women:

But you Communists would introduce community of women, screams the bourgeoisie in chorus. [...] [N]othing is more ridiculous than the virtuous indignation of our bourgeois at the community of women which, they pretend, is to be openly and officially established by the Communists. [...] Bourgeois marriage is, in reality, a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalised community of women. For the rest, it is self-

⁹⁵ This was the first international communist organization. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were both members.

evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private. (Manifesto of the Communist Party, MECW 6:502)

It is entirely misguided, as I hope will be only more obvious to readers today, to suppose that in a transition to communism, women would simply be socialized right along with the rest of private property. The charge itself reveals to what extent women are treated as, thought to be, and to an extent under capitalism actually are, objects to be owned. By assuring that every person's needs are satisfied and thereby eliminating the dependence of women upon men, communism would actually dissolve social relations in which women become objects of private property. This is especially apparent in that the whole social and economic basis for prostitution, an institution in which human beings but particularly women are bought and sold, would be abolished, whereas it flourishes today in capitalist society. Here, too, Marx and Engels show that bourgeois society fails to realize the principles and standards it sets for itself, that its ideologists engage in further hypocrisy when they accuse communism of failures which belong rather to bourgeois society, and that communism would for the first time realize such aims as the full emancipation of women.

In response to the second charge, that communism will abolish the bourgeois family, Marx responds:

The bourgeois clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:502)

In other words, communism could hardly do more to destroy the sanctity of family relationships than is already done in capitalist society. For all the paeans sung to the institution of the family

under capitalism, the family is very often the site of abuse and petty tyranny (today, three million reports of child abuse are made in the United States each year⁹⁶). As Marx writes in the 1845 document, “Peuchet: On Suicide”:

The most cowardly, unresisting people become implacable as soon as they *can exercise their absolute parental authority*. The abuse of this authority is, as it were, *a crude compensation*⁹⁷ for all the submissiveness and dependence to which they abase themselves willy-nilly in bourgeois society. (*Peuchet: On Suicide*, MECW 4:605)

And in addition to all this, stretched to the limit by long hours and grueling working conditions, many parents are deprived of time and energy to devote to building better family relationships and closer ties to one another and to their children, even if they wanted to. Because of this, whatever feelings of sympathy and care they might have towards the members of their families can find little expression.

So bourgeois society fails to realize its own principle of upholding and supporting the institution of the family. On the other hand, communist society would remove the extreme dependence of child upon parent by providing social resources for the care and education of children, thereby decreasing the vulnerability of children to abuse. Parents themselves would be under significantly less pressure, insofar as their own needs would be met and the character of work would be radically transformed, and would have greater time and resources to devote to their children. Such features of communist society would make it more possible for there to be familial bonds based on love rather than on abject dependence and the treatment of children (and wives) as pieces of private property.

⁹⁶ Statistic from <http://www.childhelp.org/pages/statistics>

⁹⁷ Marx's emphasis throughout this citation.

To avoid the conclusion that fundamentally different relations of production would be required in order to remedy the ills produced by capitalist society, some suggest that perhaps what is most needed is greater and improved education of the masses⁹⁸. Marx critically evaluates this suggestion in the 1847 document, “Wages”:

2. Another suggestion, very popular with the bourgeoisie, is *education*, especially comprehensive *industrial education*.

We shall not draw attention to the trite contradiction which lies in the fact that modern industry replaces compound labour more and more with simple labour which requires no education; we shall not draw attention to the fact that it throws more and more children from the age of seven upwards behind the machine and turns them into a source of income not only for the bourgeois class but for their own proletarian parents; the factory system frustrates the school laws, example Prussia; nor shall we draw attention to the fact that the education of the mind, if the worker had such an education, has no direct effect at all on his wages, that education is altogether dependent on the conditions of life, and that by moral education the bourgeois understands indoctrination with bourgeois principles, and that, finally, the bourgeois class neither has the means, nor if it had them would it use them, to offer the people a real education. (“Wages”, MECW 6:427)

Capitalism, as Marx writes later in *The Communist Manifesto*, must educate the worker in order to prepare her for the tasks of industrial production. However, there is another tendency under capitalism with regard to education that exists in contradiction to the need for better-educated workers. As production becomes more complex and more sophisticated, the division of labor intensifies. Tasks to be performed become increasingly one-sided and therefore so does the type of education necessary for a worker to perform them. This decreases the bourgeoisie's incentive to educate workers, as doing so becomes increasingly superfluous to capitalist production and the accumulation of profit. (Consider for a moment the 2009 *Chronicle of Higher Education* titled, “Are Too Many Students Going to College?” First of all, it is telling that such a question could even come up in a society at our stage of development. It is even more telling that several respondents—all professionals in higher education—answered this question in the affirmative. In

⁹⁸ Think here of John Dewey or Maria Montessori.

one particularly startling case, Bryan Caplan, an associate professor of economics at George Mason University, supported his affirmative reply with the observation that college attendance “deprives the economy of millions of man-years of output.”⁹⁹

Education as a cure-all for social ills is indeed a chimera in bourgeois society, as education itself is subject to, and developed and provided in accordance with, the needs of capitalist production. Marx underscores this point with the claim that “by moral education the bourgeois understands indoctrination with bourgeois principles.” The social problems inherent in capitalist society will not be corrected through its system of education, bringing us back to the point that for such moral ideals as the emancipation of women or loving family relationships to be realized, would require a transformation of society itself through a change in the relations of production.

As we have seen thus far in this section, Marx does engage in immanent critique of bourgeois society and bourgeois morality, aiming to show that these institutions fail even by their own standards. However, it would be wrong to suggest that Marx in any way limits himself to immanent critique. As seen in his critique of Malthusianism, Marx is perfectly happy to criticize the standards themselves and to criticize moral theories specifically because they do simply serve to uphold bourgeois society and to obscure its inherent faults and limitations.

In *The Communist Manifesto*, while Marx devotes a great deal of attention to specific bourgeois moral criticisms of communism, he also in the end assumes a dismissive posture, writing that “The charges against Communism made from a religious, a philosophical, and

⁹⁹ <http://chronicle.com/article/Are-Too-Many-Students-Going-to/49039>

generally, from an ideological standpoint, are not deserving of serious examination” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:503). According to Marx, they are not deserving of serious examination because it is so obvious that “man's ideas, views and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life.” I would like to point out that it does not in any way follow from this that Marx thinks philosophy and ideology are inherently wrong or worthless. Rather, the point he is making here is that at the end of the day, bourgeois ideology is tied to bourgeois interests and it would be a mistake not to understand the historical, social, and economic basis from which these ideas are developed. And as I have shown, while Marx might not think these charges are *deserving* of serious examination, still he provides them with serious examination, because they cannot simply be ignored if one is to make the case for communism to persons living in a capitalist society and influenced by bourgeois consciousness.

As Marx continues to turn his attention more directly to practical concerns in history and politics in the years following the completion of *The German Ideology*, we see that he outlines positions on specific moral problems such as capital punishment and slavery. Here, I will attempt to show the kind of moral reasoning that Marx employs in discussing these issues, focusing here on the example of capital punishment. This will shed further light upon Marx's moral philosophy.

3.2.1 Marx on Capital Punishment

In his article, “Capital Punishment,” written in 1853 for the *New York Daily Tribune*, Marx criticizes the practice of capital punishment in England, writing that “it would be very difficult,

if not altogether impossible, to establish any principle upon which the justice or expediency of capital punishment could be founded, in a society glorying in its civilization.” (*Capital Punishment:-Mr. Cobden's Pamphlet:-Regulations of the Bank of England*, MECW 11:496) In building his argument for this claim, Marx appeals to several of the principles which I have argued form the basis of his moral philosophy. In particular, his critique of capital punishment centers largely around a conception of the human individual as a multi-faceted being that ought to be dealt with not just in terms of one side or aspect of its existence, but as an organic whole¹⁰⁰.

Marx considers three arguments advanced in favor of capital punishment. These are the argument from amelioration, the argument from deterrence and the argument from retribution. Marx begins by assessing the arguments from amelioration and deterrence together. He describes these arguments briefly as follows: “Punishment in general has been defended as a means either of ameliorating or of intimidating.” (*Capital Punishment:-Mr. Cobden's Pamphlet:-Regulations of the Bank of England*, MECW 11:496) The argument from amelioration holds that punishment is justified as a means to comfort other persons who may have been hurt or disturbed by the crime of the accused. The argument from deterrence holds that punishment is justified in virtue of its effectiveness in discouraging other would-be criminals from breaking the law. Such would-be criminals, it is supposed, would be deterred from crime out of the fear that they may become subject to the same sort of treatment as the person who has been convicted and punished. Marx's

¹⁰⁰ It is important to note that although Marx argued here against the practice of capital punishment, he did not at any point renounce revolutionary violence. As I mentioned earlier in Section 2.5, in my treatment of Marx's critique of Utopianism, Marx argues that in pursuing their aims, the proletariat will at times be met with reactionary violence on the part of the bourgeoisie and will have to defend itself against this violence, sometimes through violent means. It must be kept in mind the context in which Marx published this argument against capital punishment. It is a polemical meant for a popular audience and aimed specifically at capital punishment as an institution used to bolster the status quo of capitalist society and bourgeois rule.

first criticism of both arguments is based on the failure of such justifications to respect the status of the accused as an individual. He writes, “Now what right have you to punish me for the amelioration or intimidation of others?” (*Capital Punishment:-Mr. Cobden's Pamphlet:-Regulations of the Bank of England*, MECW 11:496) A harm done to the convicted criminal, Marx states, cannot be justified on the basis of some effect it would have upon others.

Marx's refutation of the argument from retribution is laid out in greater detail, and demonstrates the connections among metaphysics, rights theory, and questions of applied ethics. Marx considers Hegel's argument that punishment is justified because the criminal has a right to it and is the author of his own punishment:

Punishment is the *right* of the criminal. It is an act of his own will. The violation of right has been proclaimed by the criminal as his own right. His crime is the negation of right. Punishment is the negation of this negation, and consequently an affirmation of right, solicited and forced upon the criminal by himself.¹⁰¹ (This is Marx's description of Hegel's argument from the *Philosophy of Right*. It appears in *Capital Punishment:-Mr. Cobden's Pamphlet:-Regulations of the Bank of England*, MECW 11:496.)

Marx responds that “German idealism here, as in most other instances, has but given a transcendental sanction to the rules of existng society.”

Is it not a delusion to substitute for the individual with his real motives, with multifarious social circumstances pressing upon him, the abstraction of “free-will” — one among the many qualities of man for man himself! This theory, considering punishment as the result of the criminal's own will, is only a metaphysical expression for the old “*jus talionis*” (the right of retaliation by inflicting punishment of the same kind) eye against eye, tooth against tooth, blood against blood. (*Capital Punishment:-Mr. Cobden's Pamphlet:-Regulations of the Bank of England*, MECW 11:496)

¹⁰¹ In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that “The injury which the criminal experiences is inherently just because it expresses his own inherent will, is a visible proof of his freedom and is his right. But more than that, the injury is a right of the criminal himself, and is implied in his realized will or act. In his act, the act of a rational being, is involved a universal element, which by the act is set up as a law. This law he has recognized in his act, and has consented to be placed under it as under his right” (G. W. Hegel, S. W. Dyde (tr.) *The Philosophy of Right*, Cosimo, Inc., 2008 p.37).

Like the argument from amelioration and like the argument from deterrence, according to Marx, the argument from retribution also fails to take into account the criminal as a whole, multi-sided, concretely existing individual. Instead of considering the criminal as an “individual with real motives” and with “multifarious social circumstances pressing upon him”¹⁰², that is, as a real individual living in society and subject to a range of drives, pressures, and influences which play a role in the commission of his crime, the argument from retribution abstracts away from that real existing individual and puts in its place an abstraction of one of the countless qualities that a person has.

For Marx, the argument from retribution fails as a justification not just for capital punishment but for punishment of any type, because where it ought to explain why it is justified to punish a real concrete individual, the argument from retribution instead changes the subject, providing a theory rather of how it can be justified to punish an “abstraction of free will.” The argument from retribution, then, functions according to Marx as a metaphysical sleight of hand, invoking the abstract free will to justify *jus talionis*, when in fact it is not the “free will” that acts, unburdened by social circumstances or “real motives,” but the specific concrete individual who acts within a sphere of freedom that is shaped and circumscribed by a host of social factors. Any satisfactory justification of punishment, then, must take this type of real actor into account.

Marx goes on to explain what he takes to be the real role of legal punishment in general and capital punishment in particular, quite apart from the arguments often made to justify the practices: “Plainly speaking, and dispensing with all paraphrases, punishment is nothing but a

¹⁰² As Marx later writes in an 1859 article *Population - Crime - and Pauperism* for the *New York Daily Tribune*, MECW 16:489, “There must be something rotten in the very core of a social system which increases its wealth without diminishing its misery, and increases in crimes even more rapidly than in numbers.”

means of society to defend itself against the infraction of its vital conditions, whatever may be their character” (*Capital Punishment:-Mr. Cobden's Pamphlet:-Regulations of the Bank of England*, MECW 11:497).

Marx's critique of capital punishment provides us with an example of how he thought his moral philosophy could be applied to specific moral questions. We see that his arguments against capital punishment each relate to how the individuality of a human person is to be understood and respected.

3.2.2 Conclusion of section on Marx's moral critiques of bourgeois society and bourgeois morality

In this section, we have discussed Marx's critiques of bourgeois society, his critiques of bourgeois morality, his refutation of bourgeois moral criticisms against communism, and the application of Marx's moral philosophy to a specific problem such as the question of capital punishment. I have attempted to demonstrate that Marx is deeply involved with moral questions and that as I argued in the earlier section on Marx's conception of ideology, he recognizes that engagement in ideological forms of thought is a necessary part of class struggle.

In Marx's earlier writings, it was always his contention that mere abstract moralizing and mere ideal criticism of existing society are not enough. Any claims about how society ought to be organized and how human beings ought to live must be grounded in an accurate appraisal of what human beings essentially are and how human society has developed throughout history. Without such a scientific understanding of human beings and of human history, any claims about what ought to be can only be abstract moral pronouncements divorced from a conception of how

such aims can be realized. In Marx's writings after *The German Ideology*, we see that Marx becomes increasingly interested in anthropology, economics and politics. But he does not, in doing so, reject his earlier concerns with moral philosophy. Instead, he becomes more concrete in investigating and explaining how human beings, who have so far produced their social being but have done so mostly unconsciously, can come to produce society consciously, and with the development of the human being as its guiding principle. For Marx, this human development continues to be a development of the human being as an all-sided individual, capable of satisfying an expanding array of needs and developing an expanding array of powers. Thus, the development of concrete or, as Marx puts it, of “rich” individuality, the full flourishing of the individual human being in the external world, and the active appropriation of that world in order to satisfy human ends, continues to appear as a moral end for human beings. As Marx argues, this end can be realized not through pious “sacrifice” or any other utopian means, but rather only through the production of a society in which human beings control their own labor and regard “man as the highest being for man.”

In the following section, I will show how in his later works, Marx continues to theorize the distinction between concrete individuality and abstract individualism, as well as this distinction's relevance to the question of how best to understand human nature. I will also explore further what consequences this latter question has for our understanding of what type of society is best suited to human beings, as well as the relevance and importance of each of these themes to the discussion of morality in Marx's work.

3.3 INDIVIDUALS AND INDIVIDUALITY

The question of how best to understand human individuality, as I have argued in the previous chapter, is a key element of Marx's moral philosophy. Marx's conception of individuality represents a significant point of departure from the abstract, atomized individual of liberal theory. Instead, Marx proceeds from an understanding of human beings as concrete "social individuals" and looks to the results of natural and social science to form the basis of his theorizing about how human beings ought to live. Instead of the liberal picture of human beings as competitive individuals who produce society in order to satisfy their egoistic wants, Marx presents human beings as essentially social and social from the time they first appear on the evolutionary scene as "herd animals," to use Marx's words, and as "tribal beings." For human beings to individuate themselves, to devote time and resources to needs that are not the strictly biological needs of a mammal in the species *Homo sapiens*, and to develop capacities beyond those narrowly suited to satisfying biological needs, is only possible through the labor process and at a point in human history when social production has begun to reach a degree of complexity and sophistication such as to support such individuation. Of course, this no doubt began to happen quite early in human history. However, the fact of human individuality is not a timeless truth about human nature, but rather a historically emergent phenomenon produced by essentially social beings through the labor process.

In the years between 1847 and 1857 (and later, as we will see in the next chapter), Marx continues to contrast his own conception of a concrete and all-sided human individuality to the notion of abstract individualism which is prominent in liberal thought. In 1857, Marx reflects

upon this abstract individualism in the *Grundrisse*, writing that it is “stupid” for a conception of human beings to take “the *isolated* man as its starting-point.” Marx continues:

Man becomes individualised only through the process of history. Originally he is a *species being*, a *tribal being*, a *herd animal*--though by no means as a ζῷον πολιτικόν in the political sense. Exchange itself is a major agent of this individuation. It makes herd-like existence superfluous and dissolves it. (*Grundrisse: Section Two: Circulation Process of Capital*, MECW: 28:420)

It is not possible to have a fully accurate understanding of human individuality without also understanding the essence of human beings as beings who produce their needs and transform their natures through social labor. Therefore, not only are the concepts of individuality, essential human nature, and labor interrelated, but their interrelation suggests the method that is best suited to successful inquiry into each of them. That method is the one that Marx describes in *The German Ideology* under the name, "historical materialism." Historical materialism takes human production and the circumstances in which it takes place to be fundamental in conditioning human existence. The historical materialist method is the most appropriate method here because humans are essentially natural and social beings, in whom the character of their social relations is produced and determined through their interactions with nature and with one another through the labor process. In understanding labor as a process in which human beings interact with nature both as part of it and as distinct from it, it is possible to see how human existence becomes increasingly sophisticated and also to see how the history of human development is also the history of the emergence and development of distinct human personalities and what Marx later terms “rich individuality.”

The development of the rich individuality of human beings is a process already occurring throughout human history. And in determining what is the highest aim and best course of action for human beings, Marx does not simply conjure up the end and the means abstractly out of

thought. Rather, he looks to the most progressive trends already existing within human history and asks how these may be promoted and developed further based on the social forces that also already exist. In much the same way that communism is “the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things,” as Marx writes in *The German Ideology*, and “not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself,” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:49) the transformation from human beings as more or less interchangeable instances of the species into distinct and developed individuals is a historical process that has taken place for the most part without being consciously aimed at by human beings. It has been, as it were, the necessary byproduct of progress and development in human social production. This is not to say that there have not been persons or movements along the way who have put forward such human development as the rightful principal aim of human society. However, such ideas have been utopian, in societies in which it was not yet possible to satisfy the needs and develop the powers of all human beings, or, they have remained exceptional and marginalized in a society aimed at profit and not at the development of human beings.. What remains now is to make this development the conscious aim of social production, and to build a society in which it is promoted and impediments to it are swept away.

The capitalist mode of production in particular has contributed greatly to making it possible for there to be more highly developed individuals than existed in feudal society or in any other previous societies. One of the most important ways in which it does this is through the process of globalization, one of the most progressive aspects of capitalism, which, by its very nature, must constantly seek out new markets for the commodities it produces as well as new sources of raw materials and fresh labor. As Marx writes, the capitalist system must “nestle

everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:487). This expansionist aspect of capitalism plays two roles that are each important here for our discussion of the development of human individuality. First, capitalism as an economic system tends to spread to more and more parts of the globe, revolutionizing society wherever it goes. Second, capitalism brings people from disparate parts of the globe into contact with and interdependence upon one another. There is precious little production carried out today that uses resources or labor that only exist within the borders of one nation. In order to do so much as cook a dinner, we purchase spices from one country, vegetables from another, cookware from a third and sit down to eat it at a table made in a fourth, while wearing clothing made in a fifth. Marx writes, “In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:488). And, he adds:

as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:488)

These “wants” build and strengthen the connections among disparate parts of the globe and make a world culture possible. They lay down the basis for the sort of global cooperation which would be necessary to build communism as an economic system. More directly relevant for the topic of this section, they take the narrow, provincial person of feudal society and transform her into the more well-rounded and worldly person of bourgeois society. They make a new wealth and diversity of human experiences and activities into live options for the individual person.

A concern with the flourishing of individual human beings continues to form the basis of Marx's normative condemnation of bourgeois society and his arguments for the creation of a new

society based on human needs, throughout his work. Marx writes in the *Manifesto* that in bourgeois society, “capital is independent and has individuality [*ist persönlich*], while the living person is dependent and has no individuality [*ist unpersönlich*]” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:499). On the other hand, in communist society, accumulated labor is “a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:499). To promote the “existence” of the worker and, more broadly, of the human being, is to make it possible for this person to interact with the world outside of herself through a wide and expanding array of activities. Under communism, production will be carried out towards the end of promoting this increased development of human beings' capacities and satisfaction of their needs.

In the present section, I begin by presenting two of the most significant features of Marx's statement that the development of “rich individuality” is the highest aim for human beings. First, Marx observes that the creation of the material basis for such an individuality already exists as an ongoing and developing process in human history. Rich individuality as the full development and proliferation of human capacities, and as the production of the human as an all-sided being rather than as a limited and degraded being, can only be realized by means of advances in society. It depends upon increased efficiency and complexity in social production and the social existence of human beings. The history of human social development is intimately and necessarily connected with the history of the emergence and further development of human individuality. In fact, they are two moments of the same historical process. In positing the development of rich individuality as the highest aim for human beings, Marx does not simply conjure up a moral command out of whole cloth, but rather argues that human beings must work consciously to

promote a process that is already developing in human history, but whose continued development depends entirely upon whether or not human beings will build a society with such human development as its guiding principle.

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

After addressing Marx's justifications for positing an all-sided development of “rich” human beings as the highest aim for humanity, I address two objections to this view. The first, is the objection that Marx's argument that promoting the existence and full realization of human beings means subordinating all social production to an all-sided human development is not enough—that we are still owed an explanation for why the promotion of human existence and human development should be considered a valuable thing at all. The second objection is that Marx's picture of all-sided development is hopelessly naive and overly optimistic about the range of activities that human beings are capable of taking part in, or that it requires too much of human beings.

Marx has several reasons for positing the full development of rich individuality as the highest aim for human beings. First, as I have already mentioned, is the fact that throughout human history, social and economic progress have allowed for a type of human being who would have increasingly many capacities. Capitalism, while it tends to narrow the worker to one specific task, also encourages her to be capable of changing tasks and quickly developing new abilities because of the casual and unreliable nature of employment. And across present-day capitalist society taken as a whole, we see human beings engaging in countless different forms of human activity. Marx argues that this shows what a wide range of activities human beings are capable of engaging in. However, while at present these activities are carried out by society as a whole, it is not the case that individual persons are in general provided with the means to engage in a wide and expanding array of activities. Communism, in making such development the highest aim of society, rather than the mere byproduct of profiteering, would organize society in such a way as to make this more possible.

Secondly, human beings already attempt to be active in different spheres, in spite of the fact that even while capitalism produces the material basis for such diverse activity, it also places real limits on the ability of the individual person to engage in it. For evidence of how human beings seek to develop their range of capabilities, I do not think we would need to look very far. Even in our society, people adopt new hobbies, develop talents that do not relate directly to their primary employment, engage in social activities such as volunteering or singing in a choir that they do not receive remuneration for, and embark on quests of "lifelong learning," picking up new languages, enrolling into a course about art history, and so on. By developing new modes of

activity in the world and by interacting with other human beings in new and challenging ways, humans express themselves in the world and thereby achieve a more full existence.

The first objection I will address here is whether Marx now owes us a further justification of the claim that human existence ought to be preserved and promoted. I think that he would regard such a question as already proceeding from a highly alienated and un-human perspective, and therefore would deny that he owes any answer to the question on its own terms. Marx writes that "man is the highest being for man," but aside from this he does not have any special answer to give to the question, Why should we promote the continuation and further development of human existence? I share Marx's diagnosis of such a question. Because value itself is a human product whose content derives, at bottom, from an assessment of how human needs can be satisfied, there is something deeply misguided about adopting any other standard for morality aside from its suitability as an aid to satisfying human needs. Morality can only be derived from a human standpoint and on the basis of a scientific worldview, assuming human beings and their needs as our standard of value.

The second objection to Marx's conception of an all-sided development of human beings which I will treat here, is that it is somehow naively utopian or hopelessly over-optimistic to suppose that human beings could or would engage in such a wide array of pursuits. While of course both Marx and Engels would like to see human beings develop as many new capacities as possible, they do not mean to raise dilettantism to a virtue, or to send human beings running frantically from activity to activity in some exhausting quest for well-roundedness. Rather, they seek to help build a society in which human beings have means to make effective choices for themselves about which activities they will pursue, and are therefore never confined to one

narrow range of activity and are able to develop as many of their talents and powers as is possible for beings such as ourselves. Because it is now for the first time in history possible for all human beings to devote a vanishingly small amount of time to socially necessary labor, a society can be produced in which human beings would be allowed to pursue their interests free from the financial and social pressures which inhibit humans from doing so today.

In the following section, I will focus on Marx's development of the concept of alienation in his works written between 1847 and 1857. But if we are to properly understand how certain aspects of human beings' existence are cut off and denied to them in the phenomenon of alienation, we must also understand what human beings essentially are and what, based on that essential nature, they could potentially become. As I discussed in the Introduction to this study, human beings are essentially natural and social beings who satisfy their needs through the labor process. However, whereas labor ought to be a development of human essence and a confirmation of the human being in her effects upon nature and upon her fellow human beings, in class society, it is converted into an oppressive denial of that kind of fulfilling and satisfying relationship with the natural world and with the species.

3.4 ALIENATION

As I discussed in the previous section, Marx's conceptions of human nature and of individuality relate closely to the concept of alienation in his work. In Chapter One, I devoted significant space to the explication of the concept of alienation in Marx. Here, my aim is primarily to show that while the word "alienation" ("*Entfremdung*" or "*Entäußerung*" in Marx's German) does not

appear in *The Communist Manifesto* or in Marx's other major works between 1847 and 1857, alienation as a phenomenon and as a problem continues to play a central theoretical role in Marx's thought.

A number of commentators¹⁰³ have taken the absence of the word “alienation” in most of the works of this period to suggest that Marx jettisoned the concept, perhaps because he found it to be incompatible with historical materialism as that method is outlined in *The German Ideology*. The claim that Marx jettisons the alienation concept is also part of the argument that there might be a moral dimension to Marx's earlier work written prior to *The German Ideology*, but that this aspect of Marx's thought is purged in a turn towards economic determinism that is alleged to take place in that work. The rationale for interpreting Marx in this way is that the moral outlook of Marx's earlier work is based upon the abolition of alienation in human life. And so, these commentators argue, with the alleged rejection of the alienation concept in Marx's later works, so the basis for any moral critique in Marx's thought disappears, as well. I find this interpretation unconvincing for several reasons. First, as I have attempted to demonstrate throughout this chapter, Marx continues to engage in moral theorizing consistently throughout his works. Secondly, while Marx does not often mention “alienation” by name, he does at many points between the years 1847 and 1857 describe the character of labor in terms almost identical to those he uses earlier when he calls that character “alienated.” The principal aim of this section is to show that Marx deployed the same conception of alienation even though he did not always deploy the same terminology to refer to the phenomenon of alienation, and that he used this

¹⁰³ Althusser's reading of Marx has been influential in this regard. Allen Wood, in his book, *Karl Marx*, also takes this view.

conception of alienation consistently to explain and to characterize the ways in which human beings under capitalism are denied from pursuing an all-sided development of their nature¹⁰⁴. As Marx's understanding of the relationship between alienation and human nature remains consistent, so does the moral critique of class society that emerges from it. I will demonstrate this primarily through comparison of passages from Marx's early writings and from the writings of the years just before and after the *Manifesto*. I focus particularly upon the remarks Marx makes about labor in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, the 1847 document "Wage Labour and Capital," and *The Communist Manifesto*.

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

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed, book-length treatment of the continuity in Marx's concept of alienation, see Istvan Meszaros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*. Also, in Lawrence Wilde's 1998 book on Marxism and morality, Wilde argues that in *The German Ideology*, Marx "affirms his adherence to his earlier position in which communism was conceived as a struggle for the appropriation of the human essence" (Wilde, *Ethical Marxism and its Radical Critics*, p.22).

Second, her labor is not an end which she pursues for its own sake, but rather merely the means to other ends. This second aspect of alienated labor is meant to follow from the first: because work appears so hateful to the worker, she would not perform it unless absolutely compelled to do so. As Marx later puts it in the 1875 “Critique of the Gotha Programme,” labor appears as “a means to life,” rather than as “life's prime want” (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87). In capitalist society, because the worker has nothing to sell but her own labor-power, and must sell *something* if she is to have money to eat, house herself, and to afford all the rest of life's necessities, she is then compelled to sell her labor-power. She therefore enters into a contract with an employer and transfers the ownership of her labor-power from herself to another person in exchange for money.

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

What, then, constitutes the alienation of labor?

First, the fact that labor is external to the worker, i.e., it does not belong to his intrinsic nature; that in his work, therefore, he does not affirm himself but denies himself, does not feel content but unhappy, does not develop freely his physical and mental energy but mortifies his body and ruins his mind. The worker therefore only feels himself outside his work, and in his work feels outside himself. He feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working he does not feel at home. His labor is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labor. It is therefore not the satisfaction of a need; it is merely a means to satisfy needs external to it. Its alien character emerges clearly in the fact that as soon as no physical or other compulsion exists, labor is shunned like the plague. External labor, labor in which man alienates himself, is a labor of self-sacrifice, of mortification. Lastly, the external character of labor for the worker appears in the fact that it is not his own, but someone else's, that it does not belong to him, that in it he belongs, not to himself, but to another. Just as in religion the spontaneous activity of the human imagination, of the human brain and the human heart, operates on the individual independently of him – that is, operates as an alien, divine or diabolical activity – so is the worker's activity not his spontaneous activity. It belongs to another; it is the loss of his self. (Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, MECW 3:274)

In this passage, Marx outlines each of the aspects of alienated labor which I have discussed above. I argue that Marx continues to theorize alienated labor after *The German Ideology*, which is the text in which he is supposed to have abandoned alienation as a concept with which to describe and explain the character of human existence in class society. For instance, in the 1844 passage from “Estranged Labour” which I have quoted above, Marx writes that the worker's labor-power “belongs, not to himself, but to another.” In the 1847 “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx writes that the worker's labor-power is part of his life activity which “he sells to another person” and that, “It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another.” (*Wage Labour and Capital*, MECW 9:202) In both passages, Marx describes a condition in which a part of the worker's life activity has come to belong to an external person, who is not himself. This condition is realized through a sale of the worker's labor-power. In “Wage Labour and Capital,” Marx writes that

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

But the putting of labour-power into action – i.e., the work – is the active expression of the labourer's own life. And this life activity he sells to another person in order to secure the necessary

means of life. His life-activity, therefore, is but a means of securing his own existence. He works that he may keep alive. He does not count the labour itself as a part of his life; it is rather a sacrifice of his life. It is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another. ("Wage Labour and Capital", MECW 9:202)

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

Although labor-power in action is life activity itself, for the worker, the exercise of that labor-power comes not to be experienced or regarded as part of his life and it comes to seem to the worker that it is the enjoyment of creature comforts that constitutes his "real life." In this sense, the alienation of labor also mirrors religious alienation, as in both cases, consciousness of reality tends to get things upside down, if only because that consciousness is also a reflection of an inverted reality. Just as in religion, human beings believe that it is their own intellectual creations which have actually produced material reality, so when labor is alienated, human beings experience themselves as most themselves and most human in precisely those activities in which they are least themselves and least human. And why shouldn't they, when the character of work itself is often so odious and mind-numbing that it fails to develop the worker as a full

human being, and rather converts him into little more than a part of a machine? Marx refers to this phenomenon in “Estranged Labour,” and he refers to it again in “Wage Labour and Capital”:

And the worker, who for twelve hours weaves, spins, drills, turns, builds, shovels, breaks stones, carries loads, etc.--does he consider this twelve hours' weaving, spinning, drilling, turning, building, shovelling, stone-breaking as a manifestation of his life, as life? On the contrary, life begins for him where this activity ceases, at table, in the public house, in bed. The twelve hours' labour, on the other hand, has no meaning for him as weaving, spinning, drilling, etc., but as earnings, which bring him to the table, to the public house, into bed. If the silkworm were to spin in order to continue its existence as a caterpillar, it would be a complete wage-worker. (Wage Labour and Capital, MECW 9:203)

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

Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labour, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman. He becomes an appendage of the machine, and it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:490)

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

While Marx does not use the word “alienation” in works such as the *Manifesto* or “Wage Labour and Capital,” in continuing to refer to the worker's separation from his own labor as a “sacrifice,” he does establish a clear terminological continuity between the two descriptions. I think there are also enough key similarities among Marx's description of labor in works before and after *The German Ideology* to bring into serious doubt whether it might be reasonably maintained that Marx jettisons the alienation concept after *The German Ideology*. It is far more likely that Marx made a terminological shift to avoid the possibility of his view being confused

with those of others who were also using the term “alienation” (“*Entfremdung*” or “*Entäußerung*”) at the time.

For Marx, the alienation that typifies class society can only be abolished once workers overthrow the existing relations of production, in which workers are compelled to “sacrifice” their labor-power and to place it under the control of the capitalist class. In the place of capitalist production, Marx argues for a system in which workers would exercise democratic control over their own labor and regard labor itself as “life's prime want”—a realization of their essence rather than an affront to it. In the next section, “Moralism, Sacrifice and Utopia,” I will address rival utopian solutions to the problem of alienation, and Marx's grounds for rejecting them in favor of a revolutionary socialist program.

3.5 MORALISM, SACRIFICE AND UTOPIA

In his writings after *The German Ideology*, Marx continues to draw the distinction between a rational assessment of how the needs of human beings can best be satisfied, and a moralistic call for self-sacrifice. As I will argue in the present section, one of the most important aspects of this distinction is how the two approaches must rely on different modes of motivation. The scientific communism developed by Marx depends on a correct assessment of the real needs of existing persons, and aims to show rationally how the needs of people can be satisfied through effective political action and revolutionary activity. On the other hand, utopianism relies upon mere moralism—emotional appeals designed to make up for the fact that utopianism lacks the resources to have motivational force on a rational basis. Critiques of moralism play a key role in

Marx's arguments against the “True Socialists,” utopian socialists who rely upon the pronouncement of moral edicts to make up for their lack of a concrete political program by means of which socialism could be realized. This distinction between scientific communism—a theory derived using the method of historical materialism—and Utopianism is brought to bear most clearly in a document that Marx wrote with Engels, titled “Circular against Kriege,” which is a critique of the practices of Hermann Kriege, a member of the International Workingmen's Association. Here, I will explain Marx and Engels' criticisms of Kriege, and how these criticisms shed light upon Marx's approach to morality.

Hermann Kriege was the editor of a German-language journal titled *Der Volks-Tribun*. *Der Volks-Tribun* was produced and distributed in New York, with the aim of representing the principles of the International Workingmen's Association (now widely referred to as “The First International”) to communists in the United States. Under Kriege's tenure as editor, the line of the journal began to deviate away from scientific communism and towards utopianism and moralism, making irrational appeals to emotion in order to convince readers to take up the cause of communism. Finally, the editorial line of *Der Volks-Tribun* veered so sharply away from the principles of the organization it was supposed to represent, that Marx and Engels introduced a set of resolutions to a meeting of the First International, denouncing Kriege for what they referred to as the “fantastic emotionalism” he put forward under the guise of communism. These resolutions constitute the aforementioned circular.

A particularly important piece of evidence in their case against Kriege is Kriege's enthusiastic promotion of self-sacrifice as a value for communists (“Circular Against Kriege”, MECW 6:45). Instead of arguing for the coincidence of every person's self-interest with the

interest of humanity, Kriege posits a moral sacrifice of setting one's own interests aside for the good of “others” who will benefit from a transition to socialism. This notion of sacrifice, of setting one's own interests aside, is totally at odds with Marxism, which argues that all human beings have an objective interest in the realization of a communist society. Kriege argues for communism not as an answer to the problems that are facing human beings, but rather as a moral imperative to be realized out of a sense of one's duty to humanity. It does precisely what, as we saw in the previous chapter, critics such as Max Stirner accused communism of doing—it posits “the common good,” or “humanity” as an abstraction that demands sacrifices from real, concrete, human individuals, and thereby only replicates alienation in a different form, rather than abolishing it.

The argument becomes yet clearer when Marx and Engels strike their final blow against the “sacrificing” Kriege (“Circular Against Kriege”, MECW 6:49). Marx criticizes Kriege because he expects to be praised for sacrificing himself for the good of others, instead of seeing revolutionary activity as something that he carries out for his own benefit as well as that of others. As Kriege writes to the reader of *Der Volks-Tribun*, “We have other things to do than worry about our *miserable selves*, we belong to mankind.” Marx replies:

With this shameful and nauseating grovelling before a “mankind” that is separate and distinct from the “self “ and which is therefore a metaphysical and in his case even a religious fiction, with what is indeed the most utterly “miserable” slavish self-abasement, this religion ends up like any other. Such a doctrine, preaching the voluptuous pleasure of cringing and self-contempt, is entirely suited to valiant — *monks*, but never to men of action, least of all in a time of struggle. It only remains for these valiant monks to castrate their “miserable selves” and thereby provide sufficient proof of their confidence in the ability of “mankind” to reproduce itself! — If Kriege has nothing better to offer than these sentimentalities in pitiful style, it would indeed be wiser for him to translate his “Père Lamennais” again and again in each issue of the *Volks-Tribun*. (“Circular Against Kriege”, MECW 6:49)

Marx and Engels accuse Kriege of misrepresenting communism as “a religion of love” (“Circular Against Kriege”, MECW 6:46), rather than presenting it as a science of human progress and development, because to follow Kriege's reasoning would be essentially to take up a religious attitude towards humanity as a new god rendered into pseudo-materialist terms. We do not “belong to mankind,” to which we must constantly sacrifice our individual self-interest. One *should* be “worried about oneself”—it is in fact this concern with oneself and one's own circumstances that can be linked together with an argument for rational social control over society's resources. There is no need for a moral leap across some perceived gap between one's self-interest and the general interest of society.

Marx and Engels are quite clear in separating their own theory from Kriege's moralistic grandstanding. The point of communism is not for people to stop “worrying about themselves.” Although Marx does not refer to “alienation” here, his comments here on sacrifice relate directly to the problem of alienation. To sacrifice oneself, after all, is to alienate oneself from oneself, to give oneself over to a being that is separate, for the satisfaction of aims that are considered more important than one's own. Marx does not think human progress can be aided by human beings denying themselves, but rather, by human beings seeking their satisfaction and fulfillment. So what Kriege presents is not communist practice, but rather, as Marx and Engels call it, “a religion of love,” an irrational and emotionalist call to self-alienation. Without a material link between self-interest and the general interest, Kriege retreats to an irrational appeal to emotion to make individuals do what is necessary for “society,” an entity whose interests are imagined to be opposed to their own.

Sacrifice appears in Marx's work as an important theme as early as *The Holy Family*, and shows up again in his polemic against Max Stirner which makes up the bulk of *The German Ideology*. There, Marx responds to Stirner's charge that communism is a so-called "good cause," requiring human beings to sacrifice for a "greater good". Marx argues that far from requiring individuals to engage in sacrifice or altruism, his theory of communism is based on the needs and interests of people, and seeks to develop, confirm, and realize human individuals, not to promote sacrifice and self-renunciation. As Marx writes, Stirner's mistake in his critique of communism is in thinking that:

the communists want to "make sacrifices" for "society", when they want at most to sacrifice existing society; in this case he should describe their consciousness that their struggle is the common cause of all people who have outgrown the bourgeois system as a sacrifice that they make to themselves. (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:213)

As we saw also in the previous section on alienation in Marx's work between 1847 and 1857, Marx rejects sacrifice as a part of his communist theory. Therefore, Marx argues that Stirner is mistaken in his understanding of communism as a call to sacrifice, and that Hermann Kriege is mistaken in urging workers not to "worry about themselves." Marx has no need to urge the proletariat on with romantic appeals to sacrifice because he proposes a course of action that is consonant with people's interests, rather than at odds with them.

In Marx's private letters, he sometimes does praise the "sacrifice" of members of the Paris Commune and of other revolutionary struggles. And he is perfectly aware that revolutionaries often do their work at great personal cost to themselves. Nothing in his arguments against Kriege or the Utopian Socialists can be taken to imply that Marx is unaware of the courage and dedication of such people, or that he is somehow stinting in his praise of them.

I think in attacking Kriege's "groveling" "self-sacrifice" and "religion of love," Marx's point is to thoroughly reject and distance himself from the moralism implicit in them. For Kriege, revolutionaries ought to act out of a sense of duty to mankind, before which they are "nothing." This is anathema to Marx, and it is not what he is praising in the revolutionaries who endure great risk and hardship to carry out their work.

In the following section, the conclusion of this chapter, I will draw together the themes of the present chapter and set the stage for the following one, a discussion of moral philosophy in Marx's works from 1858 to his death in 1883.

3.6 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER THREE

Rather than shying away from philosophical themes, Marx continues to engage with them in the period between *The German Ideology* and the publication of the first volume of *Capital*. Here, I have focused on how Marx's treatment of ideology, bourgeois morality, individuality, alienation and sacrifice are developed throughout this period, and how each of these themes relates to the others as part of Marx's developing conception of morality. Tracing Marx's treatment of these themes between the years 1847 and 1857 will make it clearer to see the philosophical continuity between Marx's work in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and the three volumes of *Capital*.

Understanding how Marx's historical materialist method informs his understanding of ideology is crucial in order to avoid mistaking Marx's critiques of the reactionary aspects of bourgeois ideology for a premature rejection of ideology, as such. Ideology is a necessary feature

of class society and can play a progressive role, as it did for the bourgeoisie in its struggle against feudalism, and does for the proletariat in its struggles. This approach to ideology, understanding it as potentially reactionary and as potentially progressive, and as indispensable to class struggle, allows Marx to continue to develop a substantive *moral* critique of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality.

A particular conception of human nature and of human individuality forms the basis of Marx's moral outlook, and I have examined how in *The Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere, Marx continues to develop the concept of a rich, concrete individuality in opposition to the abstract individualism of bourgeois theory. Marx continues to develop his view that the development of human individuality is the highest aim for human beings, and the analysis of how he does this is then useful for taking a closer look at Marx's critique of alienation, as alienation for Marx is a condition in which human beings are prohibited from satisfying their needs and developing their capacities (and thereby, from developing their individuality and from realizing their essence as human beings).

Others have argued that Marx rejects the alienation concept after *The German Ideology*, but I have demonstrated in this chapter that although Marx uses different terminology during this period of his work, the concept of alienation is readily identifiable in his writings and continues to play an important role in his thought. The words “sacrifice” or “self-sacrifice” frequently appear as ways to refer to the phenomenon of alienation, and I have attempted to show this, as well as to discuss how Marx's rejection of sacrifice ties together with his rejection of “utopian” socialism and abstract moralizing.

At several points throughout this chapter, I have laid particular emphasis upon *The Communist Manifesto*. Far from being “merely political,” that is to say, far from being an abandonment of philosophy, *The Communist Manifesto* is in fact a philosophically rich text and presents a marriage of theory with practical program. I have attempted to show that while Marx turns more directly to political and economic analyses of capitalism, he does not abandon the moral conception that first emerges in his earlier works, but rather continues to develop it and to determine how a society in which “man is the highest being for man” could be finally realized. In the following chapter, I will conduct a similar treatment of Marx's works between 1858 and 1883, including the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, showing how Marx's moral philosophy continues to deepen and develop in this later period.

4.0 MARX'S MORAL THOUGHT IN HIS WRITINGS FROM 1858 TO 1883

This chapter treats Marx's later writings, including the *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and other works such as Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* and *The Civil War in France*. During this period, Marx turns more directly to economics and to a thorough critique of political economy. However, he never turns away from the philosophical commitments of earlier writings such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. Rather, he enriches that philosophical conception with a more concrete economic and historical foundation. Here, Marx's explorations of such themes as human individuality, social progress and development, and alienation only deepen, becoming richer and more complex.

The first section of this chapter, Section 4.1, addresses the question of economic determinism in Marx's mature work. A careful reading of these texts reveals the absurdity of separating Marx's opus into two parts: the earlier, "humanist" work, and the later, "economic determinist" work. Marx always understands that it is human beings who make history, but they do so within constraints from objective limits in the world and in the society around them. As a thinker deeply concerned with the realization and expansion of human freedom, Marx asks how those objective limits—when taken together, he often refers to these as a "boundary" of "natural necessity"—can be "pushed back" so that human beings may exercise more conscious, rational control in more areas of their existence, and realize human flourishing.

Marx argues that the highest aim for human beings is the production and development of rich individuality: the satisfaction of expanding needs and the open-ended development of productive capacities. It is this full and free human development that constitutes the principal and highest aim for human beings, and the basis of the thoroughly humanist moral philosophy that Marx develops throughout his work.

Section 4.2 specifically addresses the theme of individuality as it plays out in Marx's later work and particularly in the *Grundrisse* and in *Capital*. Not only does Marx derive his concept of alienation using the method of historical materialism, but the concept of alienation and the concept of the rich individual also go hand in hand. For it is understanding the historical development of alienation and its sharpening under capitalism that allows Marx to see what the worker's struggle and the strivings against alienating conditions are struggles *for* and strivings *toward*. Understanding the essence of human social existence as the labor process, and examining how that process is disrupted and distorted in class society and particularly under capitalism, provides a basis for understanding how the transformation of labor from a mere means to life into "life's prime want," the establishment of a condition in which human beings would regard labor not as a hostile necessity but rather as human activity itself and the free development of the human essence, is both possible and desirable.

In Section 4.3, I discuss the theme of alienation and its abolition. As I have explained in the last chapter, alienation remains a crucial concept for Marx throughout his career. Here, I examine the role it plays in these later works and argue that Marx is deploying the same concept in his later works that he uses in earlier writings such as the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

Section 4.4 focuses on Marx's critiques of bourgeois rights, freedom, and equality. The fact that Marx is skeptical of each of these has been interpreted to mean that he regards morality itself as illusory or inherently reactionary. This section explains the flaws in this view, which can only be maintained if it is assumed that bourgeois rights, freedom and equality can form the only plausible basis for a coherent moral theory. I also address Marx's return to the subject of Utilitarianism, as he revisits this issue in *Capital*, formulating new critiques of Jeremy Bentham's Utilitarianism and addressing John Stuart Mill, as well.

In Section 4.5, which is the conclusion of this chapter, I return to the question of economic determinism and show the relationship of Marx's conceptions of human freedom and of rich individuality to his approach to morality. I also argue that, in light of the treatment offered in this chapter, it would be thoroughly incorrect to suppose that Marx's later works are in any sense “amoral” or that he abandons his interest in philosophical questions.

4.1 THE QUESTION OF ECONOMIC DETERMINISM IN MARX'S MATURE WORK

Marx speaks, especially in *Capital*, of the capitalist as “capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will” (*Capital*, MECW 35:164), a person who acts in a manner that is to a great extent determined by economic laws which guide the movement of the capital she possesses. He also speaks, in *Capital* and elsewhere, of the actions of the proletariat understood in terms of what it is as a class and what, by virtue of that nature, it will be compelled to do. Numerous authors have taken this strand in Marx's thought to indicate a crude economic

determinism on which human actions are one-sidedly determined by economic laws that operate beyond their control. Karl Popper, for instance, whose influence in the Anglophone reception of Marx has, I think, been more influential than some would care to admit, writes that Marx adhered “to the false belief that a rigidly scientific method must be based on a rigid determinism”¹⁰⁵. Indeed, it has become something like conventional wisdom that Marx subscribed to a crude economic determinism that would make human freedom unintelligible, and thereby rule out or at least render incoherent and unintelligible any genuinely moral content in his work. Hence, a recently published work in micro-economics could claim that Marx's “economic determinism had consequences for the picture of human beings in Marxist theory, and for the freedom of action of economically acting individuals. They have no autonomy of action, they only carry out economic laws”¹⁰⁶. And Jules Townshend in his 1996 book, *The politics of Marxism: the critical debates*, could write:

a potential conflict arose between Marx's economic determinism and his idea of human agency, which allowed individuals, and particularly classes, a certain autonomy of action, through 'practical-critical' activity. Marx's idea that communism was inevitable permitted him to avoid the question of whether it was morally desirable. [...] Yet what if the determinist theory, upon which this 'inevitability' rested, was flawed? Would this not then put the moral appeal of socialism centre stage?¹⁰⁷

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

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

¹⁰⁵ Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies*, Psychology Press 2003 p. 93.

¹⁰⁶ My translation. Adelheid Biesecker and Stefan Kesting, *Mikroökonomik: Eine Einführung aus Sozial-ökologischer Perspektive* Oldenbourg Wissenschaftsverlag, 2003, p.75.

¹⁰⁷ Jules Townshend, *The politics of Marxism: the critical debates*, pg. 19.

Kamenka writes that this conception had a “servile character,” and that in following Marx, “Marxists were upholding a servile and unfree morality” (Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, pp.164-5). Willis H. Truitt, in his 2005 book, *Marxist Ethics: a short exposition*, wittily describes this state of affairs regarding the critical reception of Marx's historical materialism, remarking, “it is odd that the issue of determinism in Marx should be brought up at this late stage of the development of Marxist thought. One might even suspect that all these years of academic anti-Marxist indoctrination which teaches that historical materialism is a deterministic system has worked”¹⁰⁸. However, it is an oversimplification to understand Marx's comments about the role of economic laws in shaping the prospects for and likelihood of communism as though they simply, with greater or lesser success, take part in a balancing act between the twin poles of deterministic inevitability and abstract moralistic voluntarism.

What Marx describes when he addresses the way in which economic laws play a role in determining the actions of human beings, are tendencies of members of various social groups to act in circumstances shaped through those laws, and not iron-clad predictions for particular individuals. Howard Sherman, in his 1981 paper, “Marx and Determinism,” puts this point very nicely when he writes:

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

¹⁰⁸ Willis H. Truitt, *Marxist Ethics: a short exposition*, International Publishers Co, 2005, p. 32

tax rates for capital gains; most farmers will favor laws that they believe to be in the interest of farmers¹⁰⁹.

As a rule, a capitalist will tend to maximize his profit irrespective of the social repercussions. A bourgeois intellectual will tend to develop theoretical justifications for the continuation of capitalism, often in spite of the glaring social contradictions.

Within what Marx would call a bourgeois standpoint, that is to say, even while continuing to support the bourgeoisie as the class most suited to lead humanity economically, politically, and otherwise, it is possible for certain members of this class to develop a keen understanding of the social contradictions produced by class society and in some cases, even a real commitment to human development or to the eradication of such ills as global poverty or unfolding ecological destruction. Marx recognizes this phenomenon. For instance, in *Capital*, Marx notes that the capitalist “Robert Owen, soon after 1810, not only maintained the necessity of a limitation of the working-day in theory, but actually introduced the 10 hours’ day into his factory at New Lanark,” even though “this was laughed at as a communistic Utopia” (*Capital*, MECW 35:304 Note 222).

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

From the Factory system budded, as Robert Owen has shown us in detail, the germ of the education of the future, an education that will, in the case of every child over a given age, combine productive labour with instruction and gymnastics, not only as one of the methods of adding to the efficiency of production, but as the only method of producing fully developed human beings. (*Capital*, MECW 35:486)

¹⁰⁹ Howard Sherman, “Marx and Determinism,” *Journal of Economic Issues*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Mar., 1981), pp. 61-71.

According to Marx, the progressive aspects of Owen's thought were, in the end, limited by his failure to recognize the proletariat as the class best suited to lead humanity out of the contradictions produced by class society. However, while a bourgeois class position and standpoint tend to limit the range of actions and opinions we are likely to see even from a reformer such as Owen, it would be wrong to ignore that within that position and perspective there remains a wide array of open choices for individual actors and they may formulate insights and opinions that, inasmuch as they strive to faithfully reflect reality and even to progressively transform it, point beyond that bourgeois perspective.

Another example of this can be found in the work of Nineteenth Century French novelist and playwright, Honoré de Balzac. Balzac of course had not bourgeois, but actually royalist sympathies, and was opposed to the bourgeoisie at a time when it played a historically progressive role. Yet, he was one of Marx's favorite authors, an artist whom Marx describes in *Capital* as “generally remarkable for his profound grasp of reality” (*Capital*, MECW 37:44).

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

Balzac was politically a Legitimist; his great work is a constant elegy on the inevitable decay of good society, his sympathies are all with the class doomed to extinction. But for all that his satire is never keener, his irony never bitterer, than when he sets in motion the very men and women with whom he sympathizes most deeply - the nobles. And the only men of whom he always speaks with undisguised admiration, are his bitterest political antagonists, the republican heroes of the Cloître Saint-Méry, the men, who at that time (1830-6) were indeed the representatives of the popular masses. That Balzac thus was compelled to go against his own class sympathies and

political prejudices, that he saw the necessity of the downfall of his favourite nobles, and described them as people deserving no better fate; and that he saw the real men of the future where, for the time being, they alone were to be found - that I consider one of the greatest triumphs of Realism, and one of the grandest features in old Balzac. (*Engels to Margaret Harkness in London; April, 1888, MECW 48:168*)

Figures such as Robert Owen and, I might add, Carl Sagan or Emile Zola, demonstrate some of the most progressive viewpoints possible within a bourgeois perspective. In addition to them, there are of course persons such as John D. Rockefeller or John F. Kennedy who simply seek mostly to rationally advance the interests of their class (I am speaking of course of a narrowly instrumental “rationality” in these cases).

Additionally, there are individuals such as Charles or David Koch, Joseph McCarthy, or Father Charles Coughlin, who actively promote the most brazenly reactionary tendencies of their class. Marx would argue that across this range of bourgeois actors, their identifications with that class inhibit them, so long as they maintain those identifications, from fully recognizing the progressive role of the proletariat and its fitness to lead society, or from fully embracing the historical materialist perspective developed in Marx's thought. However, within that bourgeois perspective and bourgeois class identification, a wide range of thought and action is possible and the charge of crude economic determinism does not recognize this, as Marx does. Furthermore, not only is a wide range of action possible within a bourgeois class identification, but it is possible for individuals to choose to renounce that identification entirely. Already in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx explains that confronted by the immense contradictions of capitalist society, increasingly many individual members of the bourgeoisie or the petty bourgeoisie may switch their class allegiance entirely to the camp of the proletariat, coming to the view that it is only the victory of the working class, leading a movement towards communism, that can safeguard the continued existence and development of humanity. Of course, one need look no

further than Marx's collaborator, Frederick Engels, for an example of a bourgeois who chooses this course. However, it would be deeply misguided to develop a theory of and a program for social and economic development that relied heavily on such occasional changes of camp, when in a society based on profit, it is the profit motive, by and large, that dominates in the decision-making of capitalists, just as it is the conscious or unconscious struggle against the inhuman aspects of labor under capitalism that dominates in the decision-making of workers.

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

In *Capital*, Marx discusses the economic trends which prepare the way for a fully human existence, but critics who accuse Marx of seeing communism as a matter of deterministic historical inevitability fail to appreciate that he also discusses how capitalism inhibits and retards that human progress and unchecked, would render it ultimately impossible. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx writes:

Capital that has such good reasons for denying the sufferings of the legions of workers that surround it, is in practice moved as much and as little by the sight of the coming degradation and final depopulation of the human race, as by the probable fall of the earth into the sun. In every stockjobbing swindle every one knows that some time or other the crash must come, but every one hopes that it may fall on the head of his neighbour, after he himself has caught the shower of gold and placed it in safety. *Après moi le déluge!* [After me, the flood] is the watchword of every capitalist and of every capitalist nation. Hence Capital is reckless of the health or length of life of

the labourer, unless under compulsion from society. To the out-cry as to the physical and mental degradation, the premature death, the torture of over-work, it answers: Ought these to trouble us since they increase our profits? But looking at things as a whole, all this does not, indeed, depend on the good or ill will of the individual capitalist. Free competition brings out the inherent laws of capitalist production, in the shape of external coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist. (*Capital*, MECW 35:275-276)

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

It is only under “compulsion from society” that humanity can be taken off of its collision course with the destructive effects of capitalism. The conscious and active intervention of the masses into politics and into world history is, in the final analysis, all that stands between us and this “final depopulation.” How much Marx thought this, we can see from his own political engagement, not to mention his lifelong dedication to investigating how the social and economic gains of capitalism can be preserved and subsumed in a higher stage of social development, and his conviction that just this ought to be done and could only be done by the active masses, the majority of society acting in the interest of the majority of society.

Second, we see mentioned in this passage the way in which the “free competition” of capitalist society reveals itself to be unfreedom in practice, taking on the “shape of external coercive laws having power over every individual capitalist.” One important question to be asked of those who see here some ground to label Marx a crude economic determinist and therefore an

amoralist, is whether they can really doubt that capitalists do in general act in ways designed to preserve and multiply their capital. "Looking at things as a whole," the capitalist, no matter how noble he might be in his heart of hearts, whether his will be "good or ill," must extract as much labor as possible, at as little cost to himself as possible, if he wishes to compete in the marketplace and to remain a capitalist, at all. It is this general tendency of people in capitalist society to defend their economic interests that makes it possible to predict that class struggle between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whose interests are in conflict with one another, will take place. However, it does not by any means guarantee which side will win out in the conflict.

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

Human beings are free to make (or not make) a revolution, but our actions are predictable by a knowledge of present and previous conditions, including our psychologies, and the laws or regularities of human behavior under these conditions. "To say that the revolution is inevitable is simply (in Marx's scheme) to say that it will occur. And it will occur . . . not in spite of any choices we might make, but because of choices we will make"¹¹⁰. The prediction of socialist revolution, however, must be expressed as a probability rather than a certainty because of our limited knowledge of the conditions and the laws.

Under capitalism, the range of actions available to people are narrowed, and within that narrow range, people are most likely, "as a whole," to take the actions which defend their economic interests. In other words, as Marx puts it elsewhere in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found,

¹¹⁰ Here Sherman is quoting Laird Addis, "The Individual and the Marxist Philosophy of History," in May Brodbeck (ed.), *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Macmillan, 1968.

given and transmitted from the past”¹¹¹. It is not possible to have a correct understanding of capitalist society without understanding the extent to which many factors, including economic laws, do delimit the range of actions available to people under capitalism and do make some actions more likely to be taken than some other ones.

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

¹¹¹ *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* MECW 11:103.

the ways that are currently possible, and to expand the sphere of free action and push necessity back to its furthest possible limit.

Of course none of this is to negate the extent to which economic processes in class society, which are the result of human actions but which have developed spontaneously, without conscious human planning or direction, have led to a historical development that points toward communism and provides the material basis for communism. For instance, as Marx points out, the forces of production are increasingly socialized even if the *relations* of production are not. It is for this reason that Marx could write in *The German Ideology* that “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise.” (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:49). The whole development of human history is a movement towards a point at which the choices for humanity become increasingly clear: “given and transmitted from the past,” they boil down to the choice to either build a movement to preserve and develop the positive contributions of class society as the historical and material basis for a society based on human needs, or to allow the destructive aspects of capitalism to simply play themselves out, dragging human culture back to a state of barbarism (think here, for instance of fascism and its historical appearance where capitalism has fallen into decay and the workers' movement has not been able to seize power) and most likely, a hastened extinction as a result of ecological crisis.

Because of the ways in which capitalism has revolutionized production, it is possible for human beings to devote a vanishingly small amount of time to satisfying their biological needs, and to devote the majority of their lives instead to the intellectual, cultural, and artistic pursuits

which enrich the social existence of humanity and develop its existence well beyond the merely biological. To use Marx's terminology, it is possible for human beings to free themselves in great part from the narrow requirements of “natural necessity.” The capitalist mode of production is especially contradictory in this respect insofar as through the drive of capitalists to revolutionize the forces of production in order to relentlessly increase efficiency and profits, it has become possible to produce enough to satisfy a wide and expanding array of human needs, and with a minimum of human labor. Under class society, however, the economic basis of society places great limits on that human development. As Marx writes in the first book of *Capital*:

all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange from him the intellectual potentialities of the labour process in the same proportion as science is incorporated in it as an independent power; they distort the conditions under which he works, subject him during the labour process to a despotism the more hateful for its meanness; they transform his life-time into working-time, and drag his wife and child beneath the wheels of the Juggernaut of capital. [...] It establishes an accumulation of misery, corresponding with accumulation of capital. Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, agony of toil slavery, ignorance, brutality, mental degradation, at the opposite pole, i.e., on the side of the class that produces its own product in the form of capital. (*Capital*, MECW 35:619)

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

Marx's moral outlook and his approach to understanding human individuality are based in the historical materialist method that he first outlined in *The German Ideology*, but already employed well before that. The *Grundrisse* opens with the line, “To begin with, the subject to be discussed is *material production*” (*Grundrisse, MECW 28:17*) How humans produce in the natural world in order to satisfy their needs is the basis for any scientific understanding of human beings. Marx goes on to write that socially determined production of individuals is the starting-point for inquiry. Marx's conception of the individual, which plays a significant role throughout his work, takes on a more robust and concrete character in his later writings, beginning especially with the *Grundrisse*, as a result of the fact that here Marx brings the results of anthropology to bear more directly and to a greater extent than in his early work. Indeed, at the end of his life, Marx became interested in the work of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan and intended to write a treatment of Morgan's writings. Marx died before he could complete that project, a work Engels later took up and carried out, publishing it as *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Although Marx had of course not done this work at the time of the *Grundrisse*, the fact that he later took it up gives us an indication of how Marx attempted to base his understanding of the individual on the results of science, so that he could theorize concrete individuality based on the lived experiences of existing human beings, rather than the abstract, one-sided individual who, he charged, forms the subject of 18th century philosophy (this is a theme to be taken up more fully in the next section of this chapter, “Marx and Individuality”).

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

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

In its mystified form, dialectic became the fashion in Germany, because it seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things. In its rational form it is a scandal and abomination to bourgeoisdom and its doctrinaire professors, because it includes in its comprehension an affirmative recognition of the existing state of things, at the same time also, the recognition of the negation of that state, of its inevitable breaking up; because it regards every historically developed social form as in fluid movement, and therefore takes into account its transient nature not less than its momentary existence; because it lets nothing impose upon it, and is in its essence critical and revolutionary. (*Capital*, MECW 35:19-20)

The critics who charge Marx with economic determinism attack him, by and large, for failing to conjure up in thought what does not already exist in reality—a world of human beings who act entirely freely and in ways undetermined by narrow economic pressures and interests. While Marx does not offer that illusion, he does say that the “existing state of things” will pass away, and does suggest how, if human society continues to exist and to develop (and that is an increasingly big “if”), it will be replaced by a stage of society in which such fully free human actors would exist. None of this, however, makes Marx into a thinker who is unable to account for or to theorize human freedom, much less morality.

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

allows Marx to conceive of a further development of the human individual, because such a development can only occur upon an economic basis that has not yet been developed, just as the full freedom of the human person also can only exist in a society in which “the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all”--a society which has not yet been produced. In reading Marx as a crude economic determinist who cannot account for human freedom, his critics reveal how little they are able to comprehend the complexity of his thought, for even while he refuses to attribute a range of freedom to human beings that does not yet exist in capitalist society, he sees how that sphere of freedom can be expanded upon a new economic base brought about by the activity of conscious human actors who leverage existing social processes to achieve their goal.

4.2 MARX AND INDIVIDUALITY

Marx contrasts his “dialectic method,” as he calls it in the *Grundrisse*, and his focus on the socially determined production of human individuals in the natural world, with the work of economists such as Adam Smith and Ricardo who, he charges, rely on a conception of human nature given to them by 18th century philosophers who take the individual in the society of “free competition,” the person who appears to be freed from any natural or social bonds, as the basis of their theorizing. Instead of understanding this type of person as a particular historical development, they understand the essence of this type of person as the essence of human nature itself and project it backward into the past, confusing a social phenomenon at a particular historical moment for a natural and stable feature of mankind.

But according to Marx, this method of abstracting away from a contemporary appearance and mistaking it for a stable essence obscures the fact that if we examine the anthropological record and attempt to understand scientifically what human beings have been over the course of their existence, we do not end up with a picture of human beings as essentially the atomized, isolated, competitive individuals of bourgeois society. Instead, “The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:18).

Marx engages a concretely historical and anthropologically based approach to further support his arguments that the atomistic individual of bourgeois ideology is little more than a chimera, an abstract, ideal construction that does not correspond to the reality of human existence, and therefore is a poor basis upon which to develop an understanding of human beings or to do moral and political theorizing apart from that which can simply endorse the actual as natural, necessary, and appropriate to (what turns out to be a mistaken and untenable view of) human nature.

Whereas theorists such as Thomas Hobbes or John Locke imagine that human existence in the so-called “State of Nature” would be a clash of competing individuals (although both thinkers, of course, acknowledge that there is little reason to suspect such a state of nature ever existed), individuated persons are themselves a product of historical and social development. Indeed, the whole notion of a “presocial” condition of human beings is little more than an ideal fantasy with no basis in anthropology, as most scientists agree it is likely that the immediate evolutionary predecessors of *Homo sapiens* already possessed a social character, although of course one that appears quite rudimentary when compared with the sociality of human beings

and the role of human labor in that sociality. There is no scientific basis upon which to suppose that human beings may have sprung into existence already at one another's throats. What we find, instead of that collection of competitive individuals pursuing narrowly egoistic interests, is that human beings exist and produce first and foremost as social beings, which brings us back of course to Marx's observation that socially determined production is the natural starting-point for any inquiry into human existence¹¹².

Labor, as I have mentioned before, especially in the introduction to this study, is the essence of human social being. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx has this to say on the subject:

The labour process [...] is human action with a view to the production of use values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase. (*Capital*, MECW 35:194)

While the notion of human beings as essentially atomized and competitive turns out to be little more than an unjustified generalization and consecration of conditions which are specific to a particular phase of human history, the conception of humans as essentially *laboring* beings is one that holds up in every phase of human existence. And furthermore, Marx writes, that labor-process is essentially social.

Marx argues that to suppose that it is possible for human beings to have produced as “isolated beings apart from society”, is as much of an absurdity as the development of speech without individuals living and speaking together. Production, he says, is always the production of

¹¹² “Socially determined production by individuals is of course the point of departure.” (MECW 28:17)

“social individuals”, and all production is the appropriation of nature by the individual within a particular form of society¹¹³. As he writes in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*:

The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole. At first, he is still in a quite natural manner part of the family, and of the family expanded into the tribe; later he is part of a community, of one of the different forms of community which arise from the conflict and the merging of tribes. It is not until the 18th century, in "bourgeois society", that the various forms of the social nexus confront the individual as merely a means towards his private ends, as external necessity. But the epoch which produces this standpoint, that of the isolated individual, is precisely the epoch of the hitherto most highly developed social (according to this standpoint, general) relations. Man is a ζῷον πολιτικόν in the most literal sense: he is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society. Production by an isolated individual outside society--something rare, which might occur when a civilised person already dynamically in possession of the social forces is accidentally cast into the wilderness--is just as preposterous as the development of language without individuals who live together and speak to one another. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:18)

Later in the *Grundrisse*, Marx reiterates these ideas when he argues that “human beings become individuals only through the process of history,” and that “exchange itself is a major agent of this individuation.” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:420). It is only in and through society that the human being becomes individualized, and so the existence of the human being as an individualized animal is one that is historically arisen and socially produced. As opposed to the picture of the human being as an essentially atomized or essentially individual being, “The human being is. . . an animal that can only individuate itself in society.” Individuation, Marx argues, is a process that takes place only within society and only at a certain stage of social and economic development. Marx himself does not flesh out this claim in great detail, but it is possible to reconstruct the story, nonetheless. For human beings to appear as individuals, and not merely as biological specimens of a certain type, requires that productive forces be developed such that the human being does not need to spend her entire waking life satisfying her merely biological needs

¹¹³ “All production is appropriation of nature by the individual within and by means of a definite form of society.” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:25)

for food, water, shelter and the like. Such a level of development in the forces of production is simply too great and complicated a task to be carried out by a single person. It is an inherently social project in that it requires a number of people, working together, communicating with one another, and developing increasingly complex ways of organizing and dividing their labor. Hence, sociality is prior to any individuation that takes part in human beings. That process of individuation is also a mark of how far human social development has progressed. The more efficiently a society satisfies biological human needs, and the more productive it is, creating new resources to satisfy the historically emergent needs that arise in an increasingly complex society, the more that its members are able to pursue activities determined more by their own expanding array of interests and less by mere biological necessity. In a phrase, we begin to see an emergence of the “rich individuality” which Marx regards as the highest aim for human beings.

However, not only is it the case that human beings appear more social the further in the past we look, but it is also true that if we take a clear look at human beings living today, we find that it also makes little sense to think of existing society as a mere aggregate of isolated individuals. Thus, Marx argues that “Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:195). Marx sometimes uses the phrase, “social individuals”; this is very apt to describing the types of actors we find in society and captures the dual aspects of human nature as inherently social and potentially “richly” individual.

4.2.1 The Development of “Rich individuality”

In the *Grundrisse*, we find the clearest description of what I have referred to previously in this study as “human flourishing,” which forms the basis of Marx's ethics. In keeping with the terminology Marx uses in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, we can now speak of this concept using the phrase, “rich individuality.”

Capitalism produces the alienation of the human being from her labor and from other human beings—in short, produces the alienation of the human being from herself, as the essence of human existence is social labor. However, capitalism, at the same time that it heightens and develops alienation to its full expression, also produces for the first time in history the resources necessary for that alienation to be overcome, and for human beings to expand beyond their narrow, limited existence and to develop in an “all-sided” manner. It was not possible, in earlier epochs, for every human being to be afforded the possibility of developing his or her own capacities in a full and rounded way and in the manner that he or she saw fit. Such a possibility could only arise when production was sufficiently developed so as to minimize the labor time necessary to satisfy the needs of the human species.

Because in the capitalist mode of production, capitalists' profit is based on driving down as far as possible the amount of labor necessary to satisfy the basic reproductive needs of their workers, capitalism has massively reduced, through the division of labor and the industrialization, mechanization, and rationalization of production, the labor necessary to satisfy human needs, thereby potentially freeing up the majority of human beings' hours for the pursuit of tasks not narrowly subordinated to the reproduction of the species. In this sense, it is

capitalism that has produced the “material elements for the development of rich individuality.”

As Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*, capitalist production provides:

the material elements for the development of the rich individuality, which is as varied and comprehensive in its production as it is in its consumption, and whose labour therefore no longer appears as labour but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity has disappeared in its immediate form; because natural need has been replaced by historically produced need. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:251)

At the same time, however, that capitalism provides the potential for such development, it fails to realize that potential. The ability to minimize socially necessary labor is expressed as a lifetime of increasingly backbreaking and alienating labor for the many, and leisure and profit for the few. To realize the promise of the capitalist mode of production, it is necessary to bring about a new socialist mode of production in which socially necessary labor would be rationally distributed among all members of the society who are capable of performing socially necessary labor, and organized in a manner aimed at satisfying the needs of human beings rather than the mere production of surplus value for its own sake.

Marx goes on to specify the features of the “rich individuality” that he sees as the highest aim for human beings. He writes that this individuality would be “as all-sided in its production as it is in its consumption.” Capitalism already tends in this direction, as it seeks to make labor increasingly productive and “drives labour beyond the limits of its natural paltriness.” Instead of human activity being constrained to narrow tasks in the division of labor, human beings could participate in a wide variety of activities, developing an array of capacities in different areas, just as human beings consume a range of social products and would consume still more in a society that made these more readily available to them.

Marx writes that labor would not appear as labor, but rather “as the full development of activity itself.” It would lose its character as a necessary evil, an unfortunate means to human existence. There would no longer be a distinction between labor time and leisure time. Labor as it appears in capitalist society would give way to labor as the expression and realization of human existence as such.

With the appearance of rich individuality, natural necessity in its immediate form would disappear and the sphere of human freedom would increase. In the place of natural, biological needs, there would be historically arisen needs—needs that are not the mere biological needs of the species, but the historically produced wants of social beings. Human freedom, as the full expression of developing human beings, would finally be really possible. Of course, the biological needs do not entirely vanish—they form the basis for and set the limits of any historically produced, social needs. But the need for shelter, for example, no longer appears as the bare need for the delicate human flesh to be shielded from the elements, but rather as the need for a comfortable home, with the modern amenities, areas suitable to a range of tasks, and so on. It becomes a need that reflects the state of historical progress which society has reached.

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

Fanatically bent on making value expand itself, he ruthlessly forces the human race to produce for production’s sake; he thus forces the development of the productive powers of society, and creates those material conditions, which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle. (*Capital*, MECW 35:588)

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

I will do my best to motivate the first question, which more bluntly stated, is this: What is so good, anyway, about satisfying human needs and developing human capacities? Why should that be the basis of our moral theory? Why not maximizing happiness? Or instantiating the virtues? Or following divine commands, for that matter?

The answer, though some will find it unsatisfying, is that we should care about the full flourishing of human beings because *they're us*. And we are more than just happiness-experiencing blobs; we are capable of a vast array of activities and experiences and it is only through the full exploration of these that we can realize our human essence as social individuals in a productive engagement with the world around us.

I think Marx would argue that the question, Why promote human flourishing?, doesn't arise unless a person already has such an alienated and un-human perspective on her own species and on the world that for her, knowing that some path of action is most likely to preserve the continued existence of human beings and to further their full development in the natural world is not enough to answer the question, Ought this path to be taken? And of course, there are people like these. The religious-minded, for instance, may think that the this-worldly orientation of rich individuality is misguided, and that the existence of man as an essentially spiritual being is to be realized through the glorification of God and an eventual assumption into Heaven. Or, in a more

mundane spin on skepticism about human flourishing in the natural world as a moral end, there is the tendency among members of the animal rights movement to regard human beings as just another type of animal among many animals, all of (at least) relatively equal moral worth. Marx, after all, is the consummate “speciesist,” insisting that value of any kind only comes onto the scene once human beings start producing in order to satisfy their needs. And this, I believe provides a significant part of Marx's answer to these types of criticisms. The mistake that these sorts of critics make is similar to the mistake made by the person who wants to know the answer to the theological question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?” to whom Marx replies:

since for the socialist man the *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the creation of man through human labour, nothing but the emergence of nature for man, so he has the visible, irrefutable proof of his *birth* through himself, of his *genesis*. Since the *real existence* of man and nature has become evident in practice, through sense experience, because man has thus become evident for man as the being of nature, and nature for man as the being of man, the question about an *alien* being, about a being above nature and man--a question which implies the admission of the unreality of nature and of man--has become impossible in practice. (*Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, MECW 3:305-306)

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

Of course, in suggesting that in the absence of a greatly disturbed relationship to the human species and to the natural world, there can be no doubt that human flourishing as Marx describes it is the highest goal for human beings, I have relied heavily on a conception of just *what* human beings are, exactly. As I have alluded to above, species of Utilitarianism fail as

moral theories because they construe human beings too narrowly. In the place of the real human being himself, stands the human being's capacity to experience happiness, to avoid suffering, etc., abstracted away from the real human being. We are promised a theory about human beings, and instead we get a theory about sensitive blobs—and worse yet, blobs that are sensitive to only one type of experience, of happiness, or of suffering. A wide range of human social relations are reduced to just one relation of usefulness.

Kantianism suffers similar problems, in that it is a moral theory based on the free will, which is itself an abstraction away from the human being. As long as the free will is properly constituted, it matters not what the effects of that will are in the material world. It is a theory unsuited to address the questions which face human beings as, precisely, natural and social beings whose essence is a metabolism with the natural world through the labor process.

Throughout the various forms and appearances that human life has taken throughout history and across different societies, what remains the same is that human beings must constantly interact with the natural world in order to produce their own existence, and that in so doing, they produce new, historically arisen needs which are also then fulfilled through the labor process, a “metabolism” with the natural world which lays the basis for a continued course of change, progress, and development. As Marx writes in *Capital*:

The labour process, resolved as above into its simple elementary factors, is human action with a view to the production of use values, appropriation of natural substances to human requirements; it is the necessary condition for effecting exchange of matter between man and Nature; it is the everlasting Nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase. (*Capital*, MECW 35:194)

Of course, Marx is not entirely unique in putting forward the idea of the development of the well-rounded human being, active in a wide and expanding sphere, as a goal for human

beings. Already in the 14th and 15th centuries, Renaissance humanists such as Leonardo da Vinci and Leon Battista Alberti developed and strove to embody the ideal of the “Universal Man,” a person who developed expertise in a wide range of pursuits, as suggested in Alberti's remark that “a man can do all things if he will.” But none of them were communists. So why should even agreeing about the desirability of rich individuality incline us to accept Marx's ideas about how the economic structure of society ought to be transformed?

In the 15th Century, the call to embody the “Universal Man” ideal could be, at best, good advice to the lucky few, as only a lucky few had time and resources enough to pursue it. The ability to make such a pursuit the general condition of human existence, and to pursue such development not merely as an individual but also within a social context in which the *social* individual develops greater solidarity with others and takes part in widespread cooperation and democratic problem-solving, could only arise upon the economic basis produced by capitalism. However, a contradiction between the immense forces of production on the one hand, and the relations of production on the other, makes it the case that the majority of the Earth's population do not have access to the resources that would be required in order to further develop their full range of capacities, including the capacity for greater and more fulfilling social involvements, which remains stunted in our society. That can only be the case in a society in which the full and free development of the human being becomes the guiding principle of society.

Some critics, such as Allen Wood in his book, *Karl Marx*, have argued that Marx cannot be said to have a moral philosophy since he appears to be concerned primarily with non-moral goods. His theory aims at the satisfaction of human needs and not at abstract moral ends such as the Good, or the Just. But I think this line of argument assumes a certain robust thesis about

morality, namely, that moral naturalism is false, and this is a thesis that is by no means universally accepted. Moreover, I take it to be a very standard understanding of morality that morality addresses the question of how human beings should live, and of measuring and learning how to close the gap between human life as it is and human life as it ought to be. Marx's conception of "rich individuality" certainly addresses each of these distinctly moral questions.

As I have already alluded to in this section, Marx's concepts of alienation and rich individuality are intimately connected, and just as Marx's description of human flourishing as "rich individuality" finds its most concretely developed expression in his later work, so the theme of alienation continues to be of central importance to Marx's critique of capitalism. In the following section, I will discuss Marx's treatment of alienation in his mature writings and show how they relate to his understanding of morality.

4.3 ALIENATION

In prioritizing production for its own sake over human beings, modern society gets things backward, and this is one of the senses in which it is an alienating society. If consciousness can only be consciousness of social being, as Marx argues, then we can understand how in a society organized on the basis of production for its own sake, even at the expense of human beings, certain absurdities become intelligible or even, common-sense and "obvious": for instance, that hundreds of workers should be condemned to misery and starvation because the factory can't use them any more. Capitalist society is alienating in that it deprives human beings of a correct

understanding of their own place in the world and obscures the fact that “man is the highest being for man.”

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx argues that in the ancient world, human beings were taken to be the aim of production. “The enquiry,” Marx argues, “is always about which form of property creates the best citizens.” In the modern world, this relation has been reversed (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:411). Human life, that is to say, human labor, human creativity, ingenuity, sociality, etc., are all instrumentalized and treated as means to production. “Production for production's sake,” as Marx puts it in *Capital*, but more precisely, the creation of surplus value, of profit, become the organizing principle of modern society (*Capital*, MECW 35:591).

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

the old view according to which man always appears in however narrowly national, religious or political a determination as the end of production, seems very exalted when set against the modern world, in which production is the end of man, and wealth the end of production. IN FACT, however, if the narrow bourgeois form is peeled off, what is wealth if not the universality of the individual's needs, capacities, enjoyments, productive forces, etc., produced in universal exchange; what is it if not the full development of human control over the forces of nature--over the forces of so-called Nature, as well as those of his own nature? What is wealth if not the absolute unfolding

of man's creative abilities, without any precondition other than the preceding historical development, which makes the totality of this development --i. e. the development of all human powers as such, not measured by any previously given yardstick--an end-in-itself, through which he does not reproduce himself in any specific character, but produces his totality, and does not seek to remain something he has already become, but is in the absolute movement of becoming?

In the bourgeois economy--and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds--this complete unfolding of man's inner potentiality turns into his total emptying-out. His universal objectification becomes his total alienation, and the demolition of all determined one-sided aims becomes the sacrifice of the [human] end-in-itself to a wholly external purpose. That is why, on the one hand, the childish world of antiquity appears as something superior. On the other hand, it *is* superior, wherever fixed shape, form and established limits are being looked for. It is satisfaction from a narrow standpoint; while the modern world leaves us unsatisfied or, where it does appear to be satisfied with itself, is merely *vulgar*. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 411-412)

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

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

converts the labourer into a crippled monstrosity, by forcing his detailed dexterity at the expense of a world of productive capabilities and instincts; just as in the States of La Plata they butcher a whole beast for the sake of his hide or his tallow. (*Capital*, MECW 35:365)

This is another aspect of alienation: individuals' scope of possible activity is narrowed under capitalism, and unnecessarily and wastefully so. The machinery developed in capitalist society's relentless push for production and wealth reduces socially necessary labor to a minimum, thereby creating the conditions for the emancipation of labor (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:87). However, instead of being liberated through this more efficient production, the worker becomes a mere accessory to the productive process and to the machine, so that objectified labor, in the form of capital, confronts living labor, in the form of the worker, as the power which rules it. "The activity of the worker, restricted to a mere abstraction of activity," Marx writes, "is determined and governed in every respect by the movement of the machinery, not vice versa" (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:82-83).

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

At the same time that factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity. The lightening of the labour, even, becomes a sort of torture, since the machine does not free the labourer from work, but deprives the work of all interest. Every kind of capitalist production, in so far as it is not only a labour-process, but also a process of creating surplus value, has this in common, that it is not the workman that employs the instruments of labour, but the instruments of labour that employ the workman. (*Capital*, MECW 35:425-426)

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

we should look on alienation in Marx's mature thought not as an explanatory concept but as a descriptive or diagnostic one [and] view it as describing the condition of a person who lacks a sense of self-worth or of meaning in life, or else preserves such a sense only by being the victim of illusions or false consciousness. (Wood, *Karl Marx*, p.44)

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

With regard to this question, I am in wholehearted agreement with Eugene Kamenka, who writes:

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

The answer is no. The positive content which Marx gave to the term 'alienation' remains central to the position he is expounding in *Capital*. The mental process of objectifying one's own product and allowing it to dominate one Marx now calls the *fetishism* of commodities; it remains the same process. Man's loss of control over his labour power Marx calls his *dehumanisation*; it, too, is the same process—a process which for Marx remains of central importance to the understanding of capitalism. Man's loss of control over the product of his work Marx now calls *exploitation*; a term which does not mean that Marx thinks the capitalist is getting too much—more than is 'reasonable', but which underlines his insistence that what belongs to one man, or to men in general, is being appropriated by others, or by some men in particular. Exploitation is made possible by the creation of surplus value; but its basic ground for Marx remains the alienation of man from his labour power, the fact that man's activity becomes a commodity. In the *German Ideology* and in Marx's economic notes and drafts made between 1850 and 1859 the connexion of all this with the term 'alienation' is made specific. But we do not need to have the connexion made specific, to have the actual term flourished in the text, to see precisely the same theme in *Wage Labour and Capital*, the *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital* itself. (Eugene Kamenka, *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism*, pp.144-5)

I do not think it is possible to seriously maintain that the concept of alienation undergoes any significant revisions at least from the time it appears in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and through the rest of Marx's works following the *Manuscripts*, and I

certainly do not think it is correct to maintain that Marx abandons the concept altogether.

Consider the following passage:

On the one hand, the process of production incessantly converts material wealth into capital, into means of creating more wealth and means of enjoyment for the capitalist. On the other hand, the labourer, on quitting the process, is what he was on entering it, a source of wealth, but devoid of all means of making that wealth his own. Since, before entering on the process, his own labour has already been alienated from himself by the sale of his labour-power, has been appropriated by the capitalist and incorporated with capital, it must, during the process, be realised in a product that does not belong to him. Since the process of production is also the process by which the capitalist consumes labour-power, the product of the labourer is incessantly converted, not only into commodities, but into capital, into value that sucks up the value-creating power, into means of subsistence that buy the person of the labourer, into means of production that command the producers. *The labourer therefore constantly produces material, objective wealth, but in the form of capital, of an alien power that dominates and exploits him; and the capitalist as constantly produces labour-power, but in the form of a subjective source of wealth, separated from the objects in and by which it can alone be realised; in short he produces the labourer, but as a wage labourer*¹¹⁴. This incessant reproduction, this perpetuation of the labourer, is the sine qua non of capitalist production. (*Capital*, MECW 35:570)

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

sells himself as an effect. He is absorbed into the body of capital as a cause, as activity. Thus the exchange turns into its opposite, and the laws of private property -- liberty, equality, property -- property in one's own labour, and free disposition over it -- turn into the worker's propertylessness, and the dispossession [*Entäußerung*] of his labour, [i.e.] the fact that he relates to it as alien property and vice versa. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:64)

To understand more fully what Marx means in statements such as this one is the work of the following section, in which Marx's critiques of the limitations and hypocrisy of bourgeois morality are explored.

¹¹⁴ My emphasis.

4.4 MARX'S CRITIQUE OF BOURGEOIS NOTIONS OF RIGHTS, FREEDOM, AND EQUALITY

*The civilization and justice of bourgeois order
comes out in its lurid light whenever
the slaves and drudges of that order
rise against their masters.*

*Then this civilization and justice stand forth
as undisguised savagery and lawless revenge¹¹⁵.*

In earlier chapters, I have detailed and explicated Marx's normative condemnations of bourgeois society and of bourgeois morality and argued that not only are these frequently and incisively made throughout Marx's writings, but that they also fit into a coherent moral philosophy in which the free and full development of the "rich individuality" of the human person figures as a standard against which to judge all social institutions and social relations. This is no less the case in Marx's later work. In writings such as the *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, such criticisms frequently take the form of critiques of bourgeois rights and bourgeois conceptions of freedom and equality. Marx also continues to develop the criticisms of Utilitarianism that he raised in earlier works, and I will discuss those criticisms in this section, as

¹¹⁵ Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France*, MECW 22:348.

well, as they provide us continued guidance in understanding Marx's own approach to moral questions.

Marx argues that bourgeois freedom, equality, and property only retain their validity within a specific form of activity under capitalism—the exchange of commodities and in particular, the sale and purchase of labor-power. Abstracting away from the rest of social existence under capitalism, it is possible to believe that the worker is truly free, because he is able to make his will effective through contract, truly equal, because he receives in exchange for his labor-power a wage of equivalent value, and truly in possession of the rights of property, because he is able to dispose of his belongings—and of course in his case we are speaking chiefly of his own labor-power—as he wills.

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

[The sphere] within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all. (*Capital*, MECW 35:186)

But as soon as we leave this realm of abstraction and see, for instance, that the worker is denied access to the means of production, it becomes possible to notice that he is not truly free to dispose of his labor-power as he wills, but rather compelled to sell it that he might continue to live. These illusions of bourgeois morality become less and less tenable, the more concretely we understand the real situation of the worker and the real economic relations of capitalist society.

The “Benthamite” notion that out of mere selfishness and private interest, the general commonwealth can be safeguarded, becomes harder to believe and the hypocrisy and contradictions of capitalist society become clearer to see.

In the *Grundrisse*, Marx discusses the nature of freedom and equality in bourgeois society, and addresses the limitations of the goals of the French Revolution. His comments on those themes in these notebooks provide an early look at arguments about the insufficiency of bourgeois ideals that are later discussed in greater detail in Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program* and in *Capital*.

Marx argues that socialism cannot be conceived of as simply a realization of bourgeois ideals such as freedom, equality, and justice, because bourgeois freedom, bourgeois equality and bourgeois justice are already realized *in bourgeois society*. The French socialists are foolish, he writes, “who wish to prove socialism to be the realisation of the ideas of *bourgeois* society enunciated by the French Revolution” (Grundrisse, MECW 28:180). It is “utopian” to suppose that the

inevitable difference between the real and ideal shape of bourgeois society, and the consequent desire to undertake the superfluous task of changing the ideal expression itself back into reality, whereas it is in fact merely the photographic image [Lichtbild] of this reality. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:180)

Once realized, bourgeois equality and freedom are proven to be inequality and unfreedom. Bourgeois freedom is the freedom of the atomistic, individual agent to buy or sell a commodity, and bourgeois equality is the formal equality of individuals who expect to receive remuneration equivalent to the value of the commodities they enter into exchange. The worker and the

capitalist already confront one another as formally free and equal in this manner¹¹⁶. It is precisely this formal universal freedom and equality which forms the basis for the capitalist mode of production and which gives rise to the widespread *de facto* bondage of workers and the *de facto* social and economic inequality so characteristic of capitalist society.

Although in capitalist society free competition is taken to be individual freedom, “free competition is the free development of the mode of production based upon capital; the free development of its conditions and of its process as constantly reproducing these conditions. In free competition, it is capital that is set free, not the individuals” (*A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, MECW 20:38). Although capitalist exchange gives rise to freedom and equality, it obscures the fact that the individual, even the capitalist individual, is not totally free because he must produce in accordance with laws that operate independently of him and which dominate him. Marx writes:

This type of individual freedom is therefore, at the same time, the most sweeping abolition of all individual freedom and the complete subjugation of individuality to social conditions which assume the form of objective powers, indeed of overpowering objects--objects independent of the individuals relating to one another. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:40)

Therefore, what is necessary now in order to promote the further development of a free human individuality is not for bourgeois freedom and equality to be realized, but rather for these to be practically superseded by higher forms of freedom and equality, with substantive freedom and equality created in the place of merely formal freedom and equality.

Hence, in the preamble to *The Programme of the French Workers' Party*, Marx writes that “the producers cannot be free unless they are in possession of the means of production”

¹¹⁶ “[...]as far as the individual, real person is concerned, a wide field of choice, caprice and therefore of formal freedom is left to him.” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 28:392)

(*Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers' Party*, MECW 24:340). This type of freedom, the freedom of the majority of society to appropriate the means of production, is of course not a realization of bourgeois freedom at all, but rather a distinctly socialist freedom in which workers would exercise direct control over the raw materials, tools, machinery, infrastructure, and so on that are required in order for production to be carried out at the level of efficiency to which it has been developed under capitalism. This substantive freedom would be directly at odds with the capitalist mode of production that depends on the forcible separation of the producers from the means of production (cf. Marx's discussion of primitive accumulation in the first volume of *Capital*).

The implementation of such a genuine, substantive freedom of course would require “*despotic inroads*”¹¹⁷ on the rights of property, and on the conditions of bourgeois production,” something Marx already wrote earlier, in *The Communist Manifesto* (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, MECW 6:504). It would neither be a realization of bourgeois freedom nor would it even be commensurate with, or justifiable on the basis of, bourgeois freedom and equality, even as it is bourgeois production which makes this substantive freedom first possible.

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

It must be acknowledged that our labourer comes out of the process of production other than he entered. In the market he stood as owner of the commodity “labour-power” face to face with other owners of commodities, dealer against dealer. The contract by which he sold to the capitalist his labour-power proved, so to say, in black and white that he disposed of himself freely. The bargain concluded, it is discovered that he was no “free agent,” that the time for which he is free to sell his labour-power is the time for which he is forced to sell it, that in fact the vampire will not lose its

¹¹⁷ Emphasis mine.

hold on him “so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited.” For “protection” against “the serpent of their agonies,” the labourers must put their heads together, and, as a class, compel the passing of a law, an all-powerful social barrier that shall prevent the very workers from selling, by voluntary contract with capital, themselves and their families into slavery and death. In place of the pompous catalogue of the “inalienable rights of man” comes the modest Magna Charta of a legally limited working day, which shall make clear “when the time which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins.” Quantum mutatus ab illo! [What a great change from that time! – Virgil]. (*Capital*, MECW 35:306)

In *Capital*, as in the *Grundrisse*, we see that the worker's freedom to enter into a contract and to dispose of his labor-power as he wills is only an illusory freedom, and that he was never in this transaction a totally “free agent” at all because he is not simply free to sell his labor-power or not, but rather is compelled to sell it if he wishes to live. That compulsion makes the worker susceptible to the most brutal working conditions. Thus, the first step in bringing about substantive freedom from oppressive working conditions and exploitative relations of production is for workers to combine together and push for laws that actually curtail the abstract freedom granted to them in bourgeois society. These measures on the part of workers are vehemently opposed by the bourgeoisie:

The same bourgeois mind which praises division of labour in the workshop, life-long annexation of the labourer to a partial operation, and his complete subjection to capital, as being an organisation of labour that increases its productiveness, that same bourgeois mind denounces with equal vigour every conscious attempt to socially control and regulate the process of production, as an inroad upon such sacred things as the rights of property, freedom and unrestricted play for the bent of the individual capitalist. (*Capital*, MECW 35:361)

As an illustration, Marx describes how in the French Revolution, the rights which could aid workers, such as the right of association, were subordinated in practice to the right of bourgeois property:

During the very first storms of the revolution, the French bourgeoisie dared to take away from the workers the right of association but just acquired. By a decree of June 14, 1791, they declared all coalition of the workers as “an attempt against liberty and the declaration of the rights of man,” punishable by a fine of 500 livres, together with deprivation of the rights of an active citizen for one year. This law which, by means of State compulsion, confined the struggle between capital and labour within limits comfortable for capital, has outlived revolutions and changes of dynasties. Even the Reign of Terror left it untouched. It was but quite recently struck out of the Penal Code.

Nothing is more characteristic than the pretext for this bourgeois coup d'état. "Granting," says Chapelier, the reporter of the Select Committee on this law, "that wages ought to be a little higher than they are, ... that they ought to be high enough for him that receives them, to be free from that state of absolute dependence due to the want of the necessaries of life, and which is almost that of slavery," yet the workers must not be allowed to come to any understanding about their own interests, nor to act in common and thereby lessen their "absolute dependence, which is almost that of slavery;" because, forsooth, in doing this they injure "the freedom of their cidevant masters, the present entrepreneurs," and because a coalition against the despotism of the quondam masters of the corporations is – guess what! – is a restoration of the corporations abolished by the French constitution. (*Capital*, MECW 35:730-731)

Bourgeois opposition to the attempts of workers to exert social control on production further reveals the practical contradiction between formal bourgeois freedom and the real freedom workers struggle for within capitalism, in struggles that necessarily point beyond capitalism for just this reason. While the capitalist defends "sacred" bourgeois freedom, he is at the same time also perfectly willing to defend the real unfreedom of the worker, the "complete subjection" of the laborer to capital.

In *Capital*, Marx lays out more specifically the inherent limits of rights talk as an aid to revolutionary and emancipatory politics, and why any gains made by the worker must be the result of struggle:

the nature of the exchange of commodities itself imposes no limit to the working day, no limit to surplus labour. The capitalist maintains his rights as a purchaser when he tries to make the working day as long as possible, and to make, whenever possible, two working days out of one. On the other hand, the peculiar nature of the commodity sold implies a limit to its consumption by the purchaser, and the labourer maintains his right as seller when he wishes to reduce the working day to one of definite normal duration. There is here, therefore, an antinomy, right against right, both equally bearing the seal of the law of exchanges. Between equal rights force decides. Hence is it that in the history of capitalist production, the determination of what is a working day, presents itself as the result of a struggle, a struggle between collective capital, i.e., the class of capitalists, and collective labour, i.e., the working-class. (*Capital*, MECW 35:243)

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

be effectively realized with a revolution in the relations of production. In this sense, Marx's attitudes toward rights and justice strongly echo his comments elsewhere that “the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production.” (*Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers' Party*, MECW 24:340)

However, Marx's approach to rights has been largely oversimplified and misunderstood. For instance, Allen Wood, in his influential book titled, *Karl Marx*, claims that “Marx positively denies that capitalist exploitation does the workers any injustice” (AWKM:127). Instead, according to Wood, Marx argues that any appeal to a notion of justice on the part of workers would be fundamentally misguided. Wood reads Marx as ruling out as invalid any moral critique of a society that does not appeal to standards that are in line with the existing economic system and serve to uphold it.

Wood believes that a section from Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Programme* supports his argument that Marx believes there is no right or justice beyond that which supports and belongs to the existing economic system. Therefore, I will start there in explaining how this reading of Marx is so misguided. Just as Marx argues for a higher form of socialist freedom which cannot simply be reduced to or understood as the realization of bourgeois freedom, so Marx argues for a higher and more substantive theory of human rights which would supersede bourgeois rights, subsuming what is best in them but ultimately supplanting them and not being merely reducible to them or understood simply as a realization of bourgeois right.

Wood quotes a single sentence from Marx's argument against the Gotha Programme's call for workers' “equal rights” to the surplus value and goods created by capitalist production: “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development

which this determines.” (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87) Marx's remarks, specifically directed at a draft political program for the United Worker's Party of Germany, are quoted out of all context in Wood's account, where Wood supposes that Marx's objection to the Gotha Programme is that it refers to rights at all.

Marx's objection to the Gotha Programme's call for equal rights is not that it appeals to the concept of rights, but that it calls for the same sort of limited formal equality which is entirely consistent with bourgeois ideology and bourgeois society and which fails to address the needs of human beings as individuals with individual requirements. The Gotha Programme's calls for an equal distribution is a step forward, but not a step far enough, since in fact, merely to provide each person with an equal share of society's products would give rise to an effective inequality. Since each person has different needs unique to his or her condition, merely to give every person an equal share would result in some people having more than they can use, some having just enough, and some having not enough at all.

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

It is worth reproducing the passage in its entirety:

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

*share in the social consumption fund, one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another, etc. To avoid all these defects, right would have to be unequal rather than equal.*¹¹⁸

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

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour, and thereby also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished; after labour has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of common wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs! (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, MECW 24:87)

This is the context in which Marx's comment that “Right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines” appears, and it is impossible to understand this comment correctly without also considering this passage as a whole. Marx argues that the first phase of communist society would bear certain “defects” with regard to rights as a result of having been born of capitalism. He further refers to the “narrow horizon of bourgeois right” which only a “higher phase of communist society” can cross. Not only this, but Marx also has a conception in mind of what standard can replace that of bourgeois right: that standard is, famously, “From each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” This connects up with earlier criticisms of right in *On the Jewish Question* and *A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. In those texts, Marx stresses the lineage of bourgeois right in a system of feudal privilege, and the status of the right to private property as the *sine qua non* of bourgeois right as a whole. That right to private property as the *jus utendi et abutendi*, the right to use or misuse an item irrespective of the interests of others, is inherently antisocial, the right of an atomized individual who seeks only to have his private sphere of influence protected against incursions from others or from society as a whole. As such

¹¹⁸ Emphasis mine.

it would have no place in the social life of a system based on such principles as solidarity and communal democratic control over all of humanity's resources.

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

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

Admire this capitalistic justice! The owner of land, of houses, the businessman, when expropriated by "improvements" such as railroads, the building of new streets, &c., not only receives full indemnity. He must, according to law, human and divine, be comforted for his enforced "abstinence" over and above this by a thumping profit. The labourer, with his wife and child and chattels, is thrown out into the street, and – if he crowds in too large numbers towards quarters of the town where the vestries insist on decency, he is prosecuted in the name of sanitation! (MECW 35:654)

Wood argues that for Marx, "a higher mode of production is not 'more just' than a lower one; it is only just in its own way." Certainly, Marx might agree that capitalism is "just in its own way." However, not only can Wood's reading not account for the biting sarcasm with which Marx speaks of such "capitalist justice," but it cannot make good sense of Marx's indictment of bourgeois right as *defective* and *narrow* when compared with the "unequal" rights of a

transitional socialist society or with the conception of right that would be instantiated in an abundantly productive communist society.

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

At first the rights of property seemed to us to be based on a man's own labour. At least, some such assumption was necessary since only commodity-owners with equal rights confronted each other, and the sole means by which a man could become possessed of the commodities of others, was by alienating his own commodities; and these could be replaced by labour alone. Now, however, property turns out to be the right, on the part of the capitalist, to appropriate the unpaid labour of others or its product, and to be the impossibility, on the part of the labourer, of appropriating his own product. The separation of property from labour has become the necessary consequence of a law that apparently originated in their identity. (*Capital*, MECW 35:583)

Alienation is the natural outcome of a society in which human labor-power itself is a commodity to be bought and sold: a society in which one is compelled by economic considerations to sell off the essential aspect of one's human being—one's capacity to produce—and make it the property of an entity that stands outside of and against oneself.

4.4.1 Marx on Utilitarianism

In Chapter One, I addressed Marx's critiques of Utilitarianism, especially as expressed in the work of James Mill and Jeremy Bentham. Marx returns to this theme in *Capital*, here expanding his critique to the moral philosophy of John Stuart Mill, as well. Whereas Marx's earlier critique of Utilitarianism focused on its reduction of diverse human social relations to one relation of usefulness or utility, Marx's later critiques are informed by the economic investigations he has carried out in the intervening years and focus more on the specific economic assumptions made

by the Utilitarian thinkers he engages with.

In *The German Ideology*, Marx is highly critical of Jeremy Bentham. At the writing of *Capital*, it would be fair to say that his opinion of Bentham has not improved. Marx's later criticisms of Bentham go beyond his critique of Benthamite Utilitarianism which he put forward in his earlier work, and are here twofold: first, Bentham's moral theory is justified by a “dogma” that social wealth is finite, and second, Bentham illegitimately universalizes and essentializes the existence of “the modern shopkeeper” as though it were obviously right to assume that what is useful to this type of person is also useful to other people in different economic positions and at all historical times.

What Marx diagnoses as Bentham's “dogmatism,” he also sees in the work of Thomas Malthus¹¹⁹ and James Mill. These writers assume that social productivity will remain at much the same level that it is now, or in any case, that it will not be possible to develop production so that it is possible to attain an abundance of products for human beings. The acceptance of this dogma gives rise then to the question of how to distribute social goods, *assuming scarcity*. Marx minces no words in his appraisal of this approach. He writes:

Classical economy always loved to conceive social capital as a fixed magnitude of a fixed degree of efficiency. But this prejudice was first established as a dogma by the arch-Philistine, Jeremy Bentham, that insipid, pedantic, leather-tongued oracle of the ordinary bourgeois intelligence of the 19th century. [...] In the light of his dogma the commonest phenomena of the process of production, as, *e.g.*, its sudden expansions and contractions, nay, even accumulation itself, become perfectly inconceivable. The dogma was used by Bentham himself, as well as by Malthus, James Mill, MacCulloch, etc., for an apologetic purpose, and especially in order to represent one part of capital, namely, variable capital, or that part convertible into labour-power, as a fixed magnitude. (*Capital*, MECW 35:605)

¹¹⁹ Of course, I don't mean to imply here that it is quite right to think of Malthus as a Utilitarian. I don't think that Marx is doing this, either.

This way of representing social wealth, Marx argues, leads to the notion that it is not possible to increase the portion of social wealth that is devoted to workers. Social production is conceived as fixed, when in fact it actually expands and contracts. Of course the relevant question is whether production can ever expand enough to lead to an abundance of social wealth such that workers' living standards can be improved. But this is exactly the point Marx wants to emphasize: that it is illegitimate to simply assume a negative answer to this question and then to go on to theorize on the basis of that negative answer. To do so, Marx charges, is to lapse into dogmatic repetition of an economic truism that has not been demonstrated. Marx continues:

The facts that lie at the bottom of this dogma are these: on the one hand, the labourer has no right to interfere in the division of social wealth into means of enjoyment for the non-labourer and means of production. On the other hand, only in favourable and exceptional cases, has he the power to enlarge the so-called labour fund at the expense of the "revenue" of the wealthy. (*Capital*, MECW 35:606)

We see these "facts" reflected in Bentham's writings, which I discussed in the treatment of Utilitarianism in Chapter One. In arguing against the appropriation of private property for public use, Bentham seems to assume that it is not possible to increase production so that everyone has access to the resources they need to live rich and satisfying lives. This assumption allows him to cast any act of socializing private property as a misguided injury of the few, to no great benefit for the many. So Bentham writes that "The profit spread among the multitude divides itself into impalpable parts; the whole loss is felt by him who supports it alone. The result of the operation is in no respect to enrich the party who gains, but to impoverish him who loses"¹²⁰. Bentham seems to assume that it is not possible to increase social wealth and that all that can be done is to distribute relatively finite wealth in different ways, in which case, Bentham argues, it can only

¹²⁰ Bentham, *Principles of the Civil Code*, Pt.1, Ch.15, Sect. 6.

seem arbitrary or cruel to diminish a few persons' utility and divide that utility up among a mass of people, each of whom will only benefit to a very limited extent as a result of it¹²¹. For Marx, on the other hand, the socialization of wealth is not simply evaluated as an end in itself, which would simply be realized on the basis of existing production. Rather, it is conceived as one necessary part of a transition to an economic system in which production could be further advanced and a condition of abundance could be achieved, which would allow for a widespread, significant, and continuing improvement of living standards. H. L. A. Hart, in his 1973 article, "Bentham and the Demystification of the Law," succinctly and accurately describes the disagreement between Bentham and Marx on this question when he writes:

Bentham was a sober reformer who examined society with the eye of a business efficiency or cost-benefit expert on the grand scale, and condemned the society of his day for its inefficient failure to satisfy, in an economic or optimal way, the desires that characterise human beings as they are. He contemplated no radical change or development in human nature and, though he thought things would be immensely better, if laws were reformed on Benthamite lines, he envisaged no millennium and no utopia. There would always, he thought, be "oppositions of interest" and "painful labour, daily subjection, and a condition nearly allied to indigence will always be the lot of numbers." [...] Marx condemned the existing forms of society not for mere inefficiency, but because its economic system stunted and distorted human beings and prevented the exploited masses, and indeed also their exploiters, from developing their distinctively human powers. This could be rectified, not by the mere spread of ideas or enlightened education or piecemeal reform, but only by a radical and, if necessary, violent transformation of the economic and social structure of society. But with that transformation complete there would be conditions under which all men could achieve their full development in a form of society where men were humanly related to each other. Such optimism about the aftermath of revolution contrasts with Bentham's sober warning that "it may be possible to diminish the influence of but not to destroy the sad and mischievous passions"¹²².

As Parekh outlines, the debate between Marx and Bentham turns in large part on their different approaches to economics, but also on their different conceptions of human nature.

¹²¹ Of course, when in developed countries such as the U.S., roughly 1% of the population controls nearly 80% of the wealth, it would be hard to argue that the distribution of this wealth across a wider layer of society would not significantly increase the standard of living of an enormous number of people. But that is slightly beside the point, here.

¹²² The Modern Law Review Vol: 36 Issue: 1 Date: 01/1973 Pages: 2 – 17.

Bentham regards human nature as relatively fixed, and destined to remain not appreciably different from its appearance in capitalist society. Marx on the other hand, argues that on the basis of a transformation in production and a revolutionary change in society, human nature could develop and flourish in a way that is not currently possible.

This leads us to the second of the two criticisms of Bentham which I identified earlier in this subsection. Marx agrees with Bentham that a coherent moral theory will be based on a sound conception of human nature. But Marx charges that Bentham pursues this project of theorizing human nature in a limited and myopic way. According to Marx, Bentham not only reduces a wide diversity of distinct human relations and modes of experience to one single relation of utility. He also relativizes utility to one type of human existence, that of the petty bourgeois small business owner. Marx writes:

The principle of utility was no discovery of Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvétius and other Frenchmen had said with esprit in the 18th century. To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations, etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch. Bentham makes short work of it. With the driest naiveté he takes the modern shopkeeper, especially the English shopkeeper, as the normal man. Whatever is useful to this queer normal man, and to his world, is absolutely useful. This yard-measure, then, he applies to past, present, and future. (*Capital*, MECW 35:65 Note 65)

Bentham, says Marx, mistakes one particular historical appearance for a human essence, wrongly taking the standard of the modern shopkeeper to be valid for all human beings, across all historical times, when in fact, whether or not a thing is useful depends on a whole host of contingent, historical factors which vary in each case.

John Stuart Mill fares much better in Marx's opinion. Marx says of "men like John Stuart Mill," that "it would be very wrong to class them with the herd of vulgar economic apologists" (such as Bentham). However, there is still a problem. Marx writes:

J. St. Mill and many other political economists conceive the relations of production as natural, eternal laws, but regard relations of distribution as artificial, of historical origin, and subject to the control, etc., of human society. (*Capital*, MECW 30:159)

Marx criticizes J. S. Mill for taking the capitalist mode of production as the necessary economic basis for all future society, yet arguing for a new system of distribution on that economic basis. But, Marx argues, it is impossible to achieve a radical transformation in the distribution of goods without also revolutionizing the mode of production. Marx writes:

Profit, a phenomenon of distribution, is here simultaneously a phenomenon of production, a condition of production, a necessary constituent part of the process of production. How absurd it is, therefore, for John Stuart Mill and others to conceive bourgeois forms of production as absolute, but the bourgeois forms of distribution as historically relative, hence transitory. [...] The form of production is simply the form of distribution seen from a different point of view. The specific features—and therefore also the specific limitation—which set bounds to bourgeois distribution, enter into bourgeois production itself, as a determining factor, which overlaps and dominates production. The fact that bourgeois production is compelled by its own immanent laws, on the one hand, to develop the productive forces as if production did not take place on a narrow restricted social foundation, while, on the other hand, it can develop these forces only within these narrow limits, is the deepest and most hidden cause of crises, of the crying contradictions within which bourgeois production is carried on and which, even at a cursory glance, reveal it as only a transitional, historical form.

Marx's argument is that capitalist production is aimed at and based in the accumulation of profit, which is an aspect of distribution. The capitalist requires a store of accumulated labor in order to make an outlay for the costs of production, and therefore requires that he receive as much of what is produced as possible. Without this, a capitalist venture will be unable to survive amidst competition from other businesses. Capitalists must reap a profit, and reinvest it into the production process in order to keep the business running. Production and distribution are therefore, on Marx's view, two aspects of a single process within capitalism, and so it is incoherent to suggest that distribution can be radically transformed upon the economic basis of capitalist production.

Moreover, Marx argues, it is wrong to suppose that the capitalist mode of production is somehow fixed, necessary, or eternal, and not merely “a transitional, historical form,” to adopt his phrase. Capitalism constantly revolutionizes the forces of production and yet, as Marx notes here and elsewhere, the relations of production restrict human progress and limit the extent to which those productive forces can be fully unleashed. The products of capitalism, as Marx writes, are not merely the commodities that are produced under it, but also these relations of production and the social relations they give rise to: “It is not just this single thing that is produced, the commodity, a commodity greater in value than the capital originally advanced — but also capital and wage labour; or, the relation is reproduced and perpetuated” (“Transformation of Money into Capital,” MECW 30:158). It is this contradiction between the (developing, expanding) forces of production and the (narrow, restricting) relations of production that Marx believes will lead to an eventual passing away of the capitalist mode of production. Marx quotes Mill in *Capital*, pointing out that

John Stuart Mill, in his “Principles of Political Economy,” says: “The really exhausting and the really repulsive labours instead of being better paid than others, are almost invariably paid the worst of all.... The more revolting the occupation, the more certain it is to receive the minimum of remuneration.... The hardships and the earnings, instead of being directly proportional, as in any just arrangements of society they would be, are generally in an inverse ratio to one another.” (*Capital*, MECW 35:606 Note 67)

So we can see why Marx does not wish to group J. S. Mill together with the “vulgar economic apologists,” as Marx appreciates the fact that J. S. Mill argues that the existing distribution of goods under capitalism is unjust and ought to be abolished and replaced by a fairer system¹²³. However, Marx also writes that “men like John Stuart Mill are to blame for the contradiction

¹²³ This, even though of course Marx would point out that the current relations *are* just at least according to the tenets of capitalist justice.

between their traditional economic dogmas and their modern tendencies.” Marx recognized J. S. Mill as a thinker who was genuinely concerned with improving society and increasing the living standards of the masses of people. Marx also certainly recognizes that J. S. Mill is far and away from the apologetic “leather-tongued oracle” that Marx took Bentham to be. His criticism of J. S. Mill’s Utilitarianism is that without a fundamental change in the way production is organized, there can be no radical changes in distribution and therefore the ills which J. S. Mill quite rightly seeks to address can never be fully eradicated on the basis of capitalist production.

In *Marx and Mill: two views of social conflict and social harmony*, Graeme Duncan writes, describing Marx’s objections to J. S. Mill:

[I]n a social order of the kind characteristically envisaged by liberals, the major liberal values could not be embodied or realised. Liberalism reflects and idealises, without transforming, the evil reality of capitalist society, which must be transformed if genuine individualism is to come into being. In its application to Mill, the charge is not hypocrisy, but that his vision of life, if it is assumed to have any relevance to the generality of the people, would require much more far-reaching structural change, especially to the property and the class system, than those which he actually advocated¹²⁴.

Marx’s dispute with J. S. Mill, then, also touches upon broader issues about the differences between liberalism and Marx’s communist theory and in particular on the central question of whether the realization of values such as individuality and freedom is possible upon the economic basis of capitalist production. Additionally, as we saw earlier in the section of this chapter on ideology, within bourgeois thought and among bourgeois thinkers there is still a wide range for different theories, viewpoints, and assessments of existing society. Marx recognizes this, distinguishing here between the “apologism” of Bentham and the sincere, if according to Marx, ultimately unrealizable progressivism of J. S. Mill.

¹²⁴ Graeme Duncan, *Marx and Mill: Two Views of Social Conflict and Social Harmony*, CUP Archive, 1997, p. 295.

G. A. Cohen argues that Marx overlooks the fact that J. S. Mill did suppose there might be some substantive changes in the way that production was organized, and therefore that Marx is unfair in charging J. S. Mill with seeing capitalist relations of production as fixed and permanent. According to Cohen:

[J. S.] Mill foresees the demise of wage labour. [...] True, he is not looking beyond commodity production. He envisages the persistence of a market economy, with capitalist firms replaced by co-operative enterprises, not a thorough socialization of the means of production. But this is not because he commits any such fallacy as the one Marx exposed. (G. A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, p. 110)

But I don't think this defense is quite enough to rescue J. S. Mill's brand of Utilitarianism from Marx's critique of it. Even on this argument, Mill leaves intact what Marx identifies as the essence of the capitalist system—commodity exchange. Marx has no shortage of arguments for why it is Utopian to propose that commodity exchange could be the economic basis for what Mill would recognize as more just relations of distribution. “Co-operative enterprises,” producing and exchanging commodities within a market economy, it must be said, *are* capitalist firms, and if they are to survive at all, they must operate in ways that are determined by the same economic laws of competition and supply and demand that, as Marx devotes so much attention to arguing, have had and continue to have a destructive social effect which must be overcome. This is the point of Marx's numerous critiques of the capitalist Robert Owen and the production of workers' co-operative enterprises as a way to be rid of the negative aspects of capitalism. It is not as though Marx were unaware that this was being proposed¹²⁵; but he is less than sanguine about the prospects because of cases like this one:

¹²⁵ In a draft of an article Marx was preparing for publication, he writes: “This much is however certain: the Americans, and particularly the poor workers in the large towns of New York, Philadelphia, Boston, etc., have taken the matter to their hearts and founded a large number of societies for the establishment of such colonies,

Equitable Labour Exchange Bazaars or Offices (the name is given in English in the German original) were founded by the workers' co-operative societies in various towns of England in 1832. This movement was headed by Robert Owen, who founded such a bazaar in London. The products of labour at these bazaars were exchanged for a kind of paper "money" issued as labour "tickets", a working hour being the unit. These bazaars were an attempt by the Utopians to organise exchange without money in the conditions of capitalist commodity production and soon proved to be a failure. (MECW 8:135)

Co-operative enterprises within a system of capitalist commodity production have been attempted, but they have remained small experiments and have not shown themselves to be likely candidates as roads to socialism. What J. S. Mill leaves fixed, even by Cohen's lights, are features of the capitalist mode of production which Marx argues must be abolished if a rational distribution of goods is to be achieved.

Allen Wood is strikingly disdainful towards Marx's critiques of Utilitarianism, but I'm not altogether convinced that Wood has brought those critiques clearly into view. He complains that "Marx's explicit statements about utilitarianism do not give us much to work with. They express contemptuous rejection of the doctrine, but give little evidence that Marx understands what he is rejecting" (Allen Wood, *Karl Marx*, p.145). Wood argues, for instance, that Marx is unfair to Jeremy Bentham when Marx writes that on Bentham's Utilitarianism, "the utility relation has quite a definite meaning, namely, that I derive benefit by doing harm to someone else" (*The German Ideology*, MECW 5:409). But I'm not sure how else we are supposed to construe Bentham's comments when he likens the world of human beings to a receptacle that can hold only a limited amount of happiness:

and all the time new communities are being set up. The Americans are tired of continuing as the slaves of the few rich men who feed on the labour of the people; and it is obvious that with the great energy and endurance of this nation, community of goods will soon be introduced over a significant part of their country. However, it is not just in America but in England too that attempts have been made to realise community of goods. Here the philanthropist *Robert Owen* has been preaching this ideal for thirty years, he has sunk the whole of his large fortune in it and given everything he had in order to found the present colony at *Harmony in Hampshire*" (MECW 4:223).

Take from your 2000 and give to your 2001 all the happiness you find your 2000 in possession of: insert in the room of the happiness you have taken out, unhappiness in as large a quantity as the receptacle will contain: to the aggregate amount of the happiness possessed by the 4001 taken together will the result be net profit? On the contrary, the whole profit will have given place to loss. How so? Because so it is that such is the nature of the receptacle, the quantity of unhappiness it is capable of containing during any given portion of time is greater than the quantity of happiness.¹²⁶

Bentham really does seem to treat the distribution of utility as a zero-sum or perhaps more accurately, a *negative*-sum game, and that serves as his rationale for eventually abandoning the principle of “the greatest happiness to the greatest number” and coming to regard it as hopelessly naïve. Bentham assumes that there is a definite limit to the amount of happiness that can be divided among members of a community, and that benefit to one person is harm to another. Bentham's conception of utility distribution is the reason that he argues that it is always morally wrong to appropriate the private property of the minority in order to distribute it among the majority—he argues that this can only amount to diminishing the happiness of the minority to an intolerable degree in order to achieve some almost unnoticeable increase of happiness to each member of the majority, so that the end result of such an operation is always an increase of unhappiness rather than of happiness. Such a view might well be worth rejecting out of hand, but as far as I can tell, it really is Bentham's considered view. If Wood has a reason for reading Bentham differently than this, he doesn't provide the argument for it or seem to address the fact that this is the view Marx has in mind. In any case, I think it is hardly accurate to say, as Wood does, that Marx's comments about Bentham “exhibit even less substantive disagreement with Bentham's principle than comprehension of it” (Wood, *Karl Marx*, p.145). Marx appears to quite accurately describe Bentham's view, and insofar as Bentham's Utilitarianism relies on an

¹²⁶ From “Excerpt on the Phrase ‘Greatest Happiness of the Greatest Number’,” in John Troyer (ed.), *The Classical Utilitarians: Bentham and Mill*, 2003

assumption of perpetual scarcity and rules out any substantive redistribution of wealth as immoral, I would think that Marx's disagreement with Benthamite Utilitarianism is, to say the least, quite substantive.

I hope to have demonstrated here that Marx is both aware of and sensitive to the existence of different strands of Utilitarianism, which he takes to be of differing degrees of merit. I also believe that Marx's critiques of Bentham and of J. S. Mill show the ways in which Marx's turn to economic questions in his later works informs a continuing engagement with moral theory. Marx's approach, and I think this is particularly clear in the case of his critique of J. S. Mill, is to examine the economic assumptions made by such theories and investigate whether the theories' positive proposals are realistic, given the specific limits that a society's modes of production can place on the ability of human beings to organize that society in a rational and moral way. But this is not by any means to suggest that moral concerns have been crowded out entirely by some strict economic determinism. Rather, Marx seems to agree in certain key respects (though, *by no means* in all respects) with J. S. Mill's moral vision of what type of society human beings should strive to build. The main bone of contention here concerns the means by which such a society is to be achieved, and what conditions must be realized in order to produce it.

In this section, I have addressed Marx's critiques of various bourgeois moral concepts such as rights and equality. After discussing these, I went on to treat Marx's later critiques of Utilitarianism, in particular, his argument that Utilitarianism only gets off the ground due to the “dogmatic” assumption that it is not possible to produce conditions of abundance, and his diagnosis of J. S. Mill's brand of Utilitarianism as resting on a failure to see economic production

and economic distribution of two aspects of a single process, so that it is not possible to transform one without transforming the other.

In the concluding section of this chapter, I will review the connections among Marx's critiques of alienation and bourgeois rights, and his historical materialist method, and explain how they relate to his moral philosophy and also interact with one another to form an argument for communism.

4.5 CONCLUSION OF CHAPTER FOUR

The way out of the crises produced by capitalism is not backward to a simpler time, and so Marx is to be distinguished from romantic anti-capitalists who recognize only the negative consequences of capitalism. Marx theorizes the ways in which capitalism has both produced the conditions in which it is possible to see clearly that the highest aim for human beings is the “greatest possible development” of their “varied aptitudes”, and made it possible to produce a society in which such a full and free development of human potential would be realized. The first volume of *Capital* features an explanation of capitalism's revolutionary and reactionary aspects in this regard, which is worth citing here in full:

[I]f, on the one hand, variation of work at present imposes itself after the manner of an overpowering natural law, and with the blindly destructive action of a natural law that meets with resistance at all points, modern industry, on the other hand, through its catastrophes imposes the necessity of recognising, as a fundamental law of production, variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes. It becomes a question of life and death for society to adapt the mode of production to the normal functioning of this law. Modern industry, indeed, compels society, under penalty of death, to replace the detail-worker of to-day, grappled by life-long repetition of one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to the mere fragment of a man, by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production, and to whom the

different social functions he performs, are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers. (*Capital*, MECW 35:490)

Under capitalism, “variation of work” tends to take the form of, on the one hand, the constant threat workers face of being thrown out of their current employment and forced to scramble for new work, or on the other hand, the drudgery and monotony of performing just one sort of task for the whole of their lives (while innumerable other workers are doing the same with regard to innumerable other tasks), so that labor in the case of each individual person takes on the character of a stultifying narrowness. Yet, capitalism also makes human production, on a social scale, ever more varied, more dynamic, and more complex. What remains to be achieved, Marx argues, is for this variation, dynamism, and complexity to be made into features of the lives of individual persons and not merely of the society taken as a whole. This is a transformation that can only be achieved as a result of the revolutionary and modernizing processes of capitalism itself, and through the conscious, rational, and social intervention of human beings into those processes so that they become man's powers rather than powers over man.

At the same time that Marx identifies tendencies within capitalism that tend toward the socialization of production and the development of “rich individuals,” he is by no means committed to any fatalism about the realization of socialism or of fully developed communism. Such an achievement will be the work of individuals cooperating consciously and socially to realize and exert their historical agency. However, it would be wrong to think that because Marx is not a strict determinist, the field is open for voluntarism and moralism, or that whether or not communism will be achieved depends entirely on the presence and number of noble revolutionaries who, *purely* out of some personal sense of virtue and moral law, produce a new

society at great cost to themselves. Communism may not be the only possible outcome, but Marx argues that when capitalism's crises become too significant for it to go on as a mode of production, the range of choices becomes strictly delimited. In the words of Rosa Luxemburg, they boil down to “socialism or barbarism” or as Marx puts it here, life or death.

As in his earlier works, here in writings such as those which make up the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*, Marx's conception of human individuals is a central focus in his worldview, along with his conviction that the development of human capacities and of “rich individuality” is the highest aim for human beings. He continues to base his criticisms of capitalism and his arguments for communism on the relative potentials of these two economic systems to allow for the exercise and expansion of human powers. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx writes that if achieved, communism would allow for the

free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour time in order to posit surplus labour, but in general the reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, to which then corresponds the artistic, scientific, etc., development of individuals, made possible by the time thus set free and the means produced for all of them. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:91)

Marx returns to this theme in the first volume of *Capital*, where he again addresses the manner in which capitalism has developed the potential for individual human development to a historically unprecedented level—a potential which can only be realized with a transition to socialist relations of production:

The intensity and productiveness of labour being given, the time which society is bound to devote to material production is shorter, and as a consequence, the time at its disposal for the free development, intellectual and social, of the individual is greater, in proportion as the work is more and more evenly divided among all the able-bodied members of society, and as a particular class is more and more deprived of the power to shift the natural burden of labour from its own shoulders to those of another layer of society. In this direction, the shortening of the working day finds at last a limit in the generalisation of labour. In capitalist society spare time is acquired for one class by converting the whole life-time of the masses into labour time. (*Capital*, MECW 35:530)

Capitalism has reduced socially necessary labor time to a minimum, but paradoxically, the more efficiently that reduction is accomplished, the more that dead labor rules over living labor, with stored-up surplus labor strengthening the hand of the capitalist against the worker. And as he writes in the third volume of *Capital*, capitalist production

squanders human lives, or living-labour, and not only blood and flesh, but also nerve and brain. Indeed, it is only by dint of the most extravagant waste of individual development that the development of the human race is at all safeguarded and maintained in the epoch of history immediately preceding the conscious reorganisation of society. (*Capital*, MECW 37:92)

And with that “conscious reorganisation of society,” Marx argues, the reduction of socially necessary labor would be a source of freedom for human beings. They would have more of their time available to them for pursuits beyond the mere struggle for survival; they would be able to exercise, develop, and expand their powers and develop as “rich individuals”.

Marx argues for a transition to a new type of society in which human beings would be able to develop as “rich individuals” who realize themselves in the external world through their conscious activity. Such a transition would, he writes, involve the achievement on the part of human beings of a better and clearer understanding of the relationship between themselves and their products. As Marx emphasizes in the *Grundrisse*, “Nature does not construct machines, locomotives, railways, electric telegraphs, self-acting mules, etc. They are products of human industry; natural material transformed into organs of man's will over Nature, or of man's activity in Nature” (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:92).

While of course everyone knows that one does not come across a locomotive in nature in just the same way one stumbles upon a frog or a ravine, it is important to fully recognize just how much promise such developments hold out for the immense ability of human beings to shape their natural and social world based on human understanding. Creations such as machines,

railways, “self-acting mules” and, we can add, computers, airplanes, and all the rest are, in Marx's words, “organs of the human brain, created by the human hand; the power of knowledge, objectified.” He continues:

The development of fixed capital shows the degree to which society's general science, knowledge, has become an immediate productive force, and hence the degree to which the conditions of the social life process itself have been brought under the control of the general intellect and remoulded according to it. (*Grundrisse*, MECW 29:92)

There is an all-too-common tendency to caricature Marx as a dull mechanist, stubbornly blind to the importance of ideas. But in examining Marx's views in the way that I have, I am convinced that quite the opposite is true. Marx is extremely clear and forceful about the power of human knowledge, and he is only *more* successful than idealist thinkers on this point because he is not forced to resort to mysticism in order to explain how it is that human beings can realize their ideas in the external world.

In this chapter, I have completed the work of tracing themes such as alienation and “rich individuality” all the way through Marx's thought and into his mature work, and showing how he continues to engage with specific issues in moral theory such as the question of moral rights and the viability of moral theories such as Utilitarianism. I have also shown that Marx continues to put forward a moral critique of capitalism and a moral argument for communism, based on his conception of human beings as natural and social beings for whom the essence of their existence is the labor process. That labor process is an active and conscious interaction of human beings with their environment, through which they satisfy their needs and develop their powers. Far from these themes taking a back seat to a one-sided and untenable economic determinism in these later works, they become the subject of an even deeper engagement during this period, as does the moral conception that they are a part of. It is here in these later works that Marx most

clearly and explicitly theorizes the full development of “rich individuality” as the highest aim for human beings.

In the following chapter, the Conclusion of this study, I will explain the lessons we can draw, now that we have achieved a careful exploration of the topic of morality across Marx's philosophical corpus. I will review the connections among Marx's treatments of topics such as alienation, individuality, human freedom, and economic development, and the relevance of each of these subjects to moral theory, over the course of his work. In addition to this, I will revisit some of the most persistent myths about Marx's moral conception, which I have tried to dispel, and suggest several avenues for further research.

5.0 CONCLUSION

Although Marx did not produce a particular work in which he laid down a systematic and thorough presentation of his own views regarding morality, he did leave behind an immense body of work investigating a wide array of issues in moral theory. Through a close and careful analysis of his thought, it is possible to see that Marx had a distinct and systematic conception of morality, and we can say what that conception was.

Marx argues that human consciousness is determined by human existence, and that the essence of that existence is the labor process—human beings' interaction with their environment in order to satisfy their needs. Human beings, Marx argues, are distinct from other types of natural beings in that they produce not merely instinctively, but as what he calls “species-beings”. They are able to produce in accordance with a conception of themselves as a species, with conditions for flourishing that belong to the species. They are also able to produce in accordance with the standards of other species and of abstractions such as beauty. Human beings produce teleologically, first representing an end in thought, and then realizing it in the external world through their labor, which Marx argues is an inherently social process.

Marx's moral theory is based on this conception of essential human nature. However, when we speak of human nature with respect to Marx's thought, it is important not to think of that nature as static or to reduce it to human beings' merely biological nature. Human beings, as

mammals, are of course biological beings and have needs that proceed directly from their nature as such. However, humans are also “social beings.” In satisfying their needs through labor, human beings develop new powers and new ways of interacting with the world around them. They transform their nature and develop “social” or “historically arisen” needs which they then go on to satisfy through the labor process. The satisfaction of those historically arisen needs allows for a further expansion of human powers, and Marx argues that this process provides the basis for a potentially limitless development and the appearance of “rich individuals” who relate to their own development as an inner need.

Marx develops his conception of human essence by investigating the results of history and anthropology. As he writes in *The German Ideology*, he applies the method of historical materialism, taking concrete, existing human beings and their real conditions of existence as the starting point for his theorizing. Marx argues that under capitalism, human beings are alienated from their essence as social beings who produce their own existence through labor. Nearly all of man's works take on an independent and hostile character that overpowers him, so that instead of human beings mastering their products, they are mastered by them. The abolition of that alienation, and the achievement of building a society in which human beings can consciously and rationally pursue their own development as an end, is the highest moral aim for Marx and forms the basis of his critiques of capitalism and arguments for communism.

Marx is concerned with the development of “rich individuals” but very critical of what he sees as the tendency of bourgeois moral philosophy to theorize not from the standpoint of concrete, living individuals as they exist in the world, but from the standpoint of “abstract individuals.” He criticizes such theories as Kant's morality based on free will or Stirner's ethical

egoism on the basis that they fail to conceive of the individual as a social being or as a being whose range of actions are in many ways determined by factors beyond his control. Similarly, Marx critiques bourgeois rights theory, arguing that the rights of the bourgeois state correspond to an imagined “atomized” subject who requires nothing from society except perhaps to be left alone to engage in the individual pursuit of happiness. While Marx argues that transitional socialist societies would still utilize and apply concepts of rights and justice, they would do so in a way that accounted more fully for the specific needs of concrete individuals. He also envisions an eventual transition to a fully developed communist society in which concepts of right and justice would not apply. This society, he argues, would realize the principle, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs,” and be based on relations of human solidarity.

Famously, Marx identifies morality as a form of ideology, and numerous interpreters have taken this as evidence that for Marx, morality is always false, illusory, and reactionary. However, I have argued here that this is not the case and that we cannot understand ideology as inherently reactionary. Morality is thoroughly ideological, however a distinction can be made between what Marx identifies as reactionary morality that functions as a bulwark of an oppressive and alienating social order, and a progressive morality which, Marx thinks, would correctly ascertain which actions, principles, social arrangements, etc. are most likely to allow for a full development of “rich individuals” who would live in accordance with their essence as natural and social beings who produce their existence through labor. Marx argues that with the resolution of class conflicts, ideological forms of thought would no longer have a basis in

material conditions. However, that time has not come, and the proletariat continues to need ideological forms of thought in order to theorize its historical situation.

Relatedly, Marx is hostile to moralism and Utopianism. He does not see moralizing or the issuance of moral judgements as an effective means, in and of itself, to realize the type of society that, he argues, would be necessary in order for human beings to live in accordance with their essence. In evaluating specific moral questions, Marx evaluates a whole host of concrete historical factors to reach a conclusion about whether a particular action, principle, movement, etc., is such as to promote or inhibit the realization of human nature and the development of what he calls “rich individuals,” human beings for whom the exercise, development, and expansion of their own capacities is their greatest need, and for whom labor has been transformed from drudgery into “life's prime want.” And so morality, according to Marx, is not mere abstract moralizing, but a scientific analysis of which things are most likely to promote the development of human beings. The morality he develops is thoroughly historical, and so the specific fact of the matter about whether an action or a state of affairs is moral or immoral can be different in different historical situations. However, on Marx's view it is possible to say with a very reasonable degree of accuracy which things are actually likely to promote the development of the “rich individuality” of human beings, and which things are not. This allows Marx to claim an objectivity for the moral judgements that he makes.

In the Introduction to this dissertation, I wrote that my intention was to pursue three related aims. First of all, I hoped to demonstrate the falsity of the doctrine of Marxist amoralism. One too-commonly held view about Marx's theory has it that Marxism's appeal to historical laws and claims to scientificity render it devoid of moral content. I have argued that at no point in

Marx's career can the doctrine of Marxist amorality be considered a correct description of his views regarding morality.

Secondly, I have attempted to show what the moral content of Marx's theory is. I have argued that Marx's approach to morality is based in a specific conception of essential human nature. For Marx, human beings are essentially natural and social beings who satisfy their needs by intervening consciously and purposively into the world around them. He argues that the highest aim for human beings is for them to live in accordance with their nature as social beings who produce their own existence through labor.

Lastly, I have attempted to show that Marx's approach to morality is both plausible and defensible. I have mostly done this by defending it against a range of charges, such as the charge that it is incoherent (because somehow at odds with his historical materialism), or that it relies on an untenable conception of human nature, or that a theory that does not appeal to eternal, intrinsic human rights cannot be rightly called a "moral theory." I am sure it has not escaped the notice of my reader that unlike numerous recent Anglophone interpreters of Marx, I have not busied myself with taking potshots at his historical materialist method¹²⁷. Rather, I have sought to show how its application to economic, political, social, and philosophical questions allowed Marx to make an astonishing array of penetrating insights into the nature of capitalist society and

¹²⁷ A few potshot takers: Jon Elster, who attempts to replace historical materialism with methodological individualism in his book, *Making Sense of Marx*; Nicholas Churchich, in *Marxism and Morality*; G. A. Cohen, in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, although there Cohen does see himself as quite friendly to Marx; R. G. Peffer, in *Marxism, Morality, and Social Justice* writes that "The notion that history is inherently tending toward communism because it is inherently tending toward the self-actualization of human species-being—in particular, the maximization of human freedom—is simply leftover Hegelian baggage having no scientific value whatever." Interestingly enough, despite the often hasty and dismissive way in which Allen Wood treats the question of Marx's approach to morality, he supplies a rather sensitive and detailed discussion of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics in his book, *Karl Marx*.

of the human condition, which remain pressingly relevant today for anyone still interested in understanding the world and promoting further human progress and development within it.

The question of whether or not Marx was a strict economic determinist is one which brings the issue of dialectics directly to the fore. I think the manner in which Marx's views regarding economic determinism have been distorted provides an example of how important it is to accurately assess his method. Marx does think that human existence is determined, in the last analysis, by the conditions of production in a given society. However, he also believes that in intervening into the natural world to satisfy their needs, which is something that they *must* do, human beings acquire new powers and thereby expand their range of freedom to act. When Marx argues that in capitalist society, human beings are controlled by the movement of commodities governed by external economic laws of supply and demand, he also emphasizes that at the very same time, those economic laws which compel human beings to produce with ever-increasing efficiency also provide the basis for a society in which socially necessary labor would be driven down to a minimum and human beings would be able to pursue interests and pursuits not narrowly subordinated to the struggle for survival. It is true, as I have emphasized in the previous chapter, that Marx does not posit a world of fully autonomous beings who act in ways totally undetermined by and independent of the world in which they exist. This goes doubly for human beings who, he argues, are alienated from their nature as natural and social beings who produce their own existence. Yet, I do not think that to acknowledge what should be an obvious fact about human beings is to assert an unfreedom that would make morality or moral judgements misguided or incoherent. It is merely to recognize that as it is, human beings operate within a limited sphere of freedom, and to argue that within that sphere, they ought to do those things

which expand their freedom, push external necessity back to its furthest possible limit, and increase the capacity of human beings to, as Marx puts it, humanize the world.

Over the course of writing this dissertation, a number of avenues for further research have seemed particularly compelling. There are a number of authors¹²⁸ who argue that while Marx might have a moral theory, he also has a problem of moral motivation and cannot provide an argument for a reliable connection between a person's recognizing that she ought to be a revolutionist and her actually being one. One thing that is striking about these authors is that they tend to leave Marx's class analysis of capitalism almost completely to the side, and they also seem to want to thrust upon Marx the very moralism that he rejects. As I have argued throughout this dissertation, Marx never thinks that there is any reason to expect that *merely* demonstrating to a person that he or she has good external reasons to bring about communism would be sufficient to motivate them to engage in revolutionary activity. His most important arguments for why people will promote communism have nothing to do with the power of purely moral persuasion, and so I strongly suspect that the critics of Marx who accuse his view of being impracticable or unrealistic because of a problem of moral motivation are pressing an objection that is somewhat beside the point.

I have addressed Marx's critiques of various forms of bourgeois liberalism, but one very interesting and important project would be to apply his critique to a brand of liberalism that claims to take to heart human development as an end in itself: the capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen. In *Capital*, Marx argues that John Stuart Mill wishes to

¹²⁸ Daniel Brudney in *Marx's Attempt to Leave Philosophy*, Allen Buchanan in "Revolutionary Motivation and Rationality," Mancur Olson in *The Logic of Collective Action*, and others.

keep capitalist relations of production intact and change the relations of distribution to better satisfy the needs of human beings along a relatively egalitarian model. Marx writes that as well-intentioned as this may be, it is thoroughly Utopian because an economic system's relations of production and relations of distribution are intrinsically related. I suspect that the capabilities approach is vulnerable to a similar (or even the same) line of argument. A Marxist treatment of Sen and Nussbaum's capabilities approach would evaluate the extent to which they seem to be satisfied to leave the basic structure of capitalism intact, and determine whether it is reasonable to suppose that, on a capitalist system, we could expect in the long run to end up with any distribution of goods much more morally defensible than the one we have now.

One common anti-communist charge is that Marxists are cold, Machiavellian calculators who believe that the end of communism justifies any means whatsoever. I think this is a very crude oversimplification of the relation between means and ends in Marx's moral reasoning. I plan to develop my dissertation further, and in doing so it would be a matter of some priority to thoroughly investigate the relationship between means and ends in Marx's thought.

I think that in light of Marx's arguments that morality is a thoroughly historical phenomenon that has arisen as a result of human social development, it would be fruitful to investigate, from a historical materialist perspective, the historical origin of moral concepts in human thought. I also think it would be a very fruitful interdisciplinary project to conduct a historical study of the reception of Marx's thought on morality within the international workers' movement and examine how Marx's ideas regarding morality have been understood, applied and further developed throughout its history. This is a project I would like to pursue in further developing my treatment of Marxist morality.

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