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ARTICLE

FREEDOM AND NECESSITY IN MARX'S ACCOUNT OF COMMUNISM

Jan Kandiyali

This paper considers whether Marx's views about communism change significantly during his lifetime. According to the 'standard story', as Marx got older he dropped the vision of self-realization in labour that he spoke of in his early writings, and adopted a more pessimistic account of labour, where real freedom is achieved outside the working-day, in leisure. Other commentators, however, have argued that there is no pessimistic shift in Marx's thought on this matter. This paper offers a different reading of this debate. It argues that there are two visions of the good life in Marx. However, it suggests that these two visions cannot be understood in terms of a simple shift between a 'young' and 'mature' Marx. Rather, it claims that Marx moves between these two visions throughout his writings. In this way, it suggests that Marx's intellectual development on this issue is best understood as an oscillation rather than a shift. Once this interpretive claim is advanced, the paper then moves on to consider some potential causes and implications of Marx's life-long oscillation between two different conceptions of the good life.

KEYWORDS: Marx; freedom; necessity

Many commentators perceive a major shift in Marx's account of communism: as Marx got older and learned more about economics, he dropped the vision of fulfilling labour that he spoke of in his early writings, and adopted a more pessimistic account of work in a future society, where real freedom is achieved outside the working-day, in leisure.¹ Other commentators, however, have questioned whether this is really the case: properly understood, they argue, there is no pessimistic shift in Marx's views on

¹See Marcuse, 'The Realm of Freedom and the Realm of Necessity', 5; Maitan, 'Alienated Labour and Free Activity in Marx's Thought', 1; Berki, 'On the Nature and Origins of Marx's Concept of Labour', 1; Plamenatz, *Karl Marx's Philosophy of Man*; Cohen, 'Marx's Dialectic of Labour', 3; Adams, 'Aesthetics'.

this matter.² Marx's view, from his early more philosophical writings to his later economic works, is that labour will be radically transformed under communism so as to be a really free and fulfilling activity.

My primary aim in this paper is to give a different interpretation of this debate. On my view, Marx moves between two ways of thinking about freedom and its relation to necessity which, I shall argue, give rise to two different models of unalienated labour. The first model states that 'true' freedom can be achieved in what Marx would later term the 'realm of necessity', that is, in labour that satisfies physical needs. The second model, by contrast, states that, while there can be a type of freedom in labour that satisfies physical needs, 'true' freedom is to be achieved outside of this realm, in activities that are undetermined by economic necessity. In this way, I argue that there are in fact two different strands in Marx's account of unalienated labour. However, on my account, these two strands cannot be understood in terms of a simple pessimistic shift between Marx's early optimistic writings and his later, supposedly less hopeful texts. Rather, I shall argue that Marx moves between these models throughout his works, never fully settling on one. It is an oscillation rather than a shift.

I will begin (in I) by briefly outlining how this debate has been conducted so far, and will then (in II) give my own reading of the passage in *Capital III* where Marx describes work as inescapably belonging to a 'realm of necessity'. In the following section (III), I contrast this passage with the canonical account of unalienated labour from Marx's early works, before going on to show (in IV) that Marx oscillates between these models throughout his lifetime. Once this interpretive claim is advanced, I then (in V) situate Marx's oscillation within two different lines of thought in the history of philosophy, before considering (in VI) some implications of Marx's life-long oscillation between two different conceptions of the good life.

I

Many commentators perceive a major shift in Marx's account of communism. In his early writings, Marx is optimistic that alienated labour can be fully overcome.³ In his later writings, however, Marx is often said to take a more pessimistic view of communist society, especially with regard to the role of labour in it. This change of views is said to have crystallized in

²See Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*; Klage, 'Marx's Realms of "Freedom" and "Necessity"', 4; Sayers, 'Freedom and the "Realm of Necessity"'.
³For Marx alienation [*Entfremdung*] refers not to a subjective feeling of meaninglessness and disorientation but to an objective state where two things that belong together come apart. In the 1844 Manuscripts, Marx argued that workers under capitalism live and produce in a way that is opposed to their species-essence, that is, the characteristics which are definitive of the human species, which Marx associates with creative labour for the community. The ideal of unalienated labour, which Marx has far less to say about, sees human beings producing in a way which accords with their 'essence'. For a helpful introduction to Marx's idea of alienation, see Wolff, *Why Read Marx Today?*

the third volume of *Capital* (hereafter *Capital III*),⁴ where Marx is now said to present a rather gloomy view of labour in a future communist society:

... the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production ... Freedom in this field [the realm of necessity] can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favourable to, and worthy of, their human nature. But it none the less remains a realm of necessity [*Reich der Notwendigkeit*]. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom [*Reich der Freiheit*], which, however, can blossom forth only with this realm of necessity as its basis. The shortening of the working-day is its basic prerequisite.

(Marx, *Capital III*, 807)

This passage has seemed to many to provide undeniable proof that Marx did in fact change his views on communism, moving away from the youthful optimism of his early writings to adopt a ‘less hopeful and more realistic’ (Plamenatz, *Marx’s Philosophy*, 171) account of labour in a future society in his mature works. Whilst Marx had previously stated that work itself would become a free, non-alienated activity under communism, he now seems to view productive activity as inescapably belonging to a ‘realm of alienation’ (Marcuse, ‘The Realm of Freedom’, 22) regardless of the mode of production in which it takes place. To be sure, labour in the ‘realm of necessity’ is much less alienated than labour under capitalism, but there remains a degree of unfreedom even under socialism. For, Marx’s idea seems to be that, ‘being a means of life ... [labour] cannot be wanted, and will be replaced by desired activity as the working day contracts’ (Cohen, ‘Marx’s Dialectic of Labour’, 261). Given that Marx’s earlier writings had seemed to unambiguously suggest that labour would be a realm of freedom and fulfilment under communism, it seems right to conclude, as Plamenatz does, that while

it was not Marx’s habit to draw his readers attention to the fact that he changed his mind about a matter of cardinal importance in his theory ... it can hardly be denied that he did so in the third volume of *Capital*.

(Plamenatz, *Marx’s Philosophy*, 171)

⁴Marx began the process of writing up *Capital III* in the summer of 1864, and had completed a first draft by the end of 1867, but never finalized it. For a more detailed insight into the complex intellectual history of *Capital III*, see Engels’s Preface (Marx, *Capital III*, 5–23).

Now, while the above ‘pessimist’ reading of Marx’s mature view of communist society has generally held sway, other commentators have argued that this reading rests on mistaken reading of Marx’s mature views, and have put forward a more optimistic reading of the passage in question. When the passage is read in its proper light, they suggest, it does not in fact reveal a pessimistic account of work in a future communist society. Crucial to their position is the argument that it is a ‘gratuitous inference’ (Klagge, ‘Marx’s Realms’, 775) to infer that the realm of necessary labour is a realm of ‘alienation’ or ‘unfreedom’. For Marx, they argue, never describes the realm of necessity in this way. On the contrary, in the very passage under discussion, Marx explicitly talks of freedom in the ‘realm of necessity’.

By reading Marx’s position in *Capital III* in a more positive light, these commentators come to see a good deal of continuity between Marx’s youthful and mature accounts of unalienated labour under communism. On their view, Marx’s position in *Capital III* does ‘not contradict Marx’s earlier views on the subject’ (Avineri, *Social and Political Thought*, 237). Rather, they should be seen as ‘an elaboration and extension’ (Klagge, ‘Marx’s Realms’, 775) of his earlier views. Marx’s view, from the first to the last, is that labour will be radically transformed under communism to provide an immense source of enjoyment to the worker.

How are we to make sense of this debate between those who see a pessimistic shift in Marx’s mature views and those who see an enduring optimism in the very same texts? In what follows, I argue that Marx’s views on labour do change significantly in his lifetime, though not in the way that is commonly supposed.

II

Let us start by taking a closer look at Marx’s distinction of the ‘realm of freedom’ and the ‘realm of necessity’ in *Capital III*. What does Marx mean by these ideas; and what, exactly, is the contrast between the ‘realm of freedom’ and the ‘realm of necessity’?

(i) Labour and Leisure

Most straightforwardly, the ‘realm of necessity’ refers to work, while the ‘realm of freedom’ refers to time outside the working day – that is, to free time or leisure. However, Marx’s use of these terms in this passage is different from the everyday meaning of ‘work’ and ‘leisure’.

While Marx often uses the concept of work or labour in a very broad way, to refer to a wide-range of creative human activities, here his idea of work or labour is narrow: the ‘realm of necessity’ refers to labour that is directed at satisfying the basic needs of society. Such labour constitutes a ‘realm of necessity’ because it is activity that must be done if society is to sustain itself.

Marx's idea of 'free time' is more sharply at odds with the everyday meaning of 'leisure'. In everyday use, leisure refers to time when one is not working, and from this it is easy to slide into conceiving leisure as a time of idleness and inertia or as time spent on hobbies and trivial pursuits. However, Marx takes a quite different view of leisure and its place in human life. For him, the deep-lying alienation of modern society manifests itself both in its estrangement of labour and in its degradation of leisure. With the overcoming of alienated labour, Marx correspondingly expects leisure to take on a very different form and role in human life. In a communist society, leisure will be a time of great exertion and creativity.

In this way, it is important to see that the contrast between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom is not a contrast between work and something trivial or inertial. On the contrary, Marx is clear that the 'realm of freedom', like the 'realm of necessity', will be a site of great human endeavour and productive activity. Rather, the contrast is between labour that is directed at satisfying human needs and creative activity that is not directed at further ends.

(ii) Two Realms of Freedom

Now, the really contentious issue here concerns whether, in describing work as belonging to a 'realm of necessity', and contrasting it with a 'realm of freedom' that lies outside of it, Marx was suggesting that work itself cannot be an activity of freedom and self-realization.

The natural temptation is to see the 'realm of freedom' and the 'realm of necessity' as being opposed to one another, so that the contrast is between a 'realm of freedom', that comprises all that is free, and a 'realm of necessity', comprising its opposite, namely, alienation, unfreedom and such like. As we have seen, this is the inference that has been drawn by a number of commentators who argue that the mature Marx became more pessimistic about the possibility of overcoming alienated labour.⁵ However, this inference seems unwarranted. There is no exegetical evidence to suggest that Marx did acquiesce in the permanence of human alienation, as is alleged. Moreover, a more careful reading of this passage reveals that Marx talks of freedom in the 'realm of necessity', and gives us a partial insight into its nature. Freedom in necessary labour, writes Marx, 'can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers rationally regulating their interchange with nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature' (Marx, *Capital III*, 807).

In this way, the contrast between the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity is not, as is it sometimes thought to be, a contrast between a realm of freedom and a realm of unfreedom. On the contrary, the contrast

⁵See footnote 1 for an extensive list.

that Marx draws here is a more nuanced one. It is a contrast between two different types or 'realms' of freedom. In what follows, I want to suggest that this contrast between two 'realms' of freedom is best understood as a contrast between freedom as self-determination, understood in a broadly Kantian way, as collectively determining one's activity instead of being ruled by external forces, and freedom as self-realization, understood in an Aristotelian way, as the development of one's distinctly human capacities and potentialities. Let us start by looking at freedom in the realm of necessity.

For Marx, the freedom involved in necessary labour is a historical accomplishment in the sense that it has emerged slowly in the course of human history as human beings have attained more and more control over their interchange with the natural world. According to Marx, man's natural condition in primitive societies is one of unfreedom. In this condition, man's life is characterized by the perennial struggle to satisfy his most basic physical needs. Over time, man develops the means to satisfy such needs, but the satisfaction of man's basic needs generates new needs of a more developed kind, which require more effective productive methods for their satisfaction. Again, man is forced to develop more dynamic productive techniques in order to satisfy his expanding needs. In doing so, however, he comes to achieve more and more freedom from the exigencies of his natural condition.

Under capitalism productive power reaches unprecedented levels of development. With the advent of industry, and the introduction of automation into the process of production, the productive powers of society are higher than at any stage in human history. This should provide the means to humanize labour and reduce the working day. But under capitalism the rich development of the social production is in stark contrast to the stunted development of the individual, and while mankind's mastery over the natural world is greater than at any point in history, man's control over the social world is now at the mercy of the market economy. Thus, 'in our days', writes Marx, 'everything seems pregnant with its contrary':

Machinery, gifted with wonderful power of shortening and fructifying human labour, we behold starving and overworking it. The new-fangled sources of wealth, by some weird spell, are turned into sources of want. The victories of art seem bought by the loss of character. At the same pace that mankind masters nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men.

(Marx, 'Speech', 655)

Communism transcends this condition. Under communism, capitalism's positive characteristics are sustained but its alienating effects are eliminated. In a communist society, the productive powers that have developed under capitalism are harnessed for the common good.

Marx was unsure as to how far productive powers might develop in the future. In his less restrained and more utopian moments, he goes as far as suggesting that a post-capitalist society will see the total liberation of man from the demands of producing the material requirements of society, that is, he predicts the abolition of necessary labour itself.⁶ In *Capital III*, however, Marx adopts a more restrained and realistic position. There, he has the good sense to argue that man must ‘wrestle’ with nature in all forms of social formation and under all modes of production. The introduction of machinery into the productive process aids and abets human labour, but it cannot eliminate it completely.

What type of freedom is there within the ‘realm of necessity’? The concept of freedom that Marx has in mind here is one of collective self-determination, where socialized man exercises full, conscious control over his economic activity. Man, whose activity has historically been determined by the blind forces of nature, by other men and, under capitalism, by the dictates of the market economy, finally takes control of his life and labour.

Having given his readers a glimpse of the type of freedom in unalienated labour, Marx then goes on to reiterate the point with which he started the passage – namely, that the ‘true realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases’ (Marx, *Capital III*, 807).

What does Marx mean by ‘true’ freedom? I think that the freedom Marx has in mind here is essentially one of individual self-realization, which consists, for Marx, in the deployment and development of one’s distinctly human powers and capacities. This seems to be what Marx has in mind when he glosses the ‘realm of freedom’ as the sphere of life which comprises the ‘development of human energy which is an end in itself’ (Marx, *Capital III*, 807). In this way, we might say that whilst the ‘realm of necessity’ is a realm of self-determination, where man exercises control over their economic activity, it is the ‘realm of freedom’ that is the realm of self-realization, the sphere of life where individuals develop their distinctly human powers and capacities.

Why is it time outside work that makes up the ‘true’ realm of freedom? Why cannot necessary labour also be an activity of self-realization? Marx does not give us an answer to these questions. He seemed to think that the answer was self-evident, lying as he puts it ‘in the very nature of things’ (Marx, *Capital III*, 807). Perhaps he accepted that modern industrial production only offers limited scope for the type of creative, varied and interesting work that lends itself to self-realization. Or, maybe he thought that as labour is determined by what society needs it will rarely accord with what individuals would ideally want to do. Either way, what is apparent is that, in *Capital III* at least, Marx looked to leisure as the sphere of life where the individual would do what they wanted to do, unconstrained by economic necessity.

⁶For one such utopian moment, see *the Grundrisse*, 91.

III

In this section, I will argue that Marx's account of non-alienated labour in *Capital III* does represent a significant departure from the canonical account of unalienated labour in the 1844 writings. To make this claim, I will look at the young Marx's fullest account of communist society, the concluding passage to his 1844 'Comments on James Mill' (hereafter the *Comments*). In this passage, Marx invites us to imagine that we had produced as 'human beings'. In that event, writes Marx:

Each of us would have in two ways affirmed himself and the other person. (1) In my production I would have objectified my individuality, its specific character, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual manifestation of my life during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be objective, visible to the senses and hence a power beyond all doubt. (2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a human need by my work, ... and of having thus created an object corresponding to the needs of another man's essential nature [*Wesen*] (3) I would have been for you the mediator [*der Mittler*] between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion [*Ergänzung*] of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love. (4) In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life.

(Marx, 'Comments', 228)

While this passage raises a number of issues, I want to specifically focus on whether, in drawing a distinction between the 'realm of freedom' and the 'realm of necessity', and arguing that 'true' freedom is to be found in the former 'realm', the Marx of *Capital III* moved away from the account of unalienated labour that he had put forward in the *Comments*.

The most immediately striking difference lies in their respective descriptions of labour. In the *Comments*, labour is the prime site of human self-realization, a sphere of life imbued with meaning and fulfilment. According to Marx, workers find fulfilment both in the productive process, which is experienced as a 'pleasure', and in the result of their labour, which serves as a kind of manifestation of their individuality. In the *Capital III* account, Marx also describes communist labour as activity that is free from the worst aspects of capitalist alienation. But while alienation is overcome, Marx does not say that work is fulfilling. He does not say, as he did in the *Comments*, that labour can be an activity of 'free expression', in which my individuality is manifested in the products I make. Nor does he say that my work is an enjoyable activity, which I experience as a 'pleasure'. Rather, he describes labour as being determined by necessity and

mundane consideration, and looks to time outside work to satisfy our need for creative activity.

This point must be made with care, however. For Marx never rejects the core thesis of his philosophical anthropology, that is, the view that creative activity is the defining feature of the human species, and a deeply meaningful and fulfilling activity. Rather, he argues that we cannot realize the inherent creativity of our nature by producing for others in a socialist economy. He looks to leisure, rather than labour, as the sphere of life in which human creativity is to be realized. In other words, Marx does not abandon his philosophical anthropology; he abandons the notion that necessary labour is the most suitable realm for its deployment.

However, there is one crucial way in which Marx's ideal of self-realization changes. For, in the *Comments*, Marx not only recognizes that labour will always be a matter of necessity; he considers the necessity of work to be a major source of labour's attraction. Indeed, the Marx of the *Comments* would argue that individuals can only achieve self-realization by producing for others.⁷ For, it is only by producing for others that I get the 'direct enjoyment' in knowing that I had helped another individual satisfy their needs, and it is only by producing for others that I would be 'recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion of your own essential nature'.

Now, it is worth noting that on this account it is left open as to whether it is labour directed at physical needs or labour directed at non-physical needs that is the prime activity of self-realization. I think that Marx's silence on this issue is intended to emphasize the point that there is no significant difference between labour that satisfies basic needs and labour that satisfies social and cultural needs: that is, there is nothing fundamentally different in the production of the basic necessities of life from the production of art, books and plays. All of these types of production can be directed towards the needs of other individuals. Consequently, they all represent suitable vehicles for self-realization.

What would not lend itself to self-realization, however, is an activity that does not satisfy anyone's needs, an activity that is done for oneself. Of course, I might enjoy a particular activity that is done purely for myself. But I will only realize my true nature by producing for others, since it is only by doing so that I will achieve the goods of mutual production.

On the *Capital III* account, it is left open whether activity in the 'realm of freedom' is directed towards human needs or not. But the contrast between freedom and necessity, and the tone of the passage more generally, suggests that it is activities that are done for oneself that will primarily comprise the 'realm' where human beings achieve self-realization. Marx implies this when he describes really free activity as activity that is not directed at further ends, an 'end in itself' (Marx, *Capital III*, 807).

⁷For a discussion of this aspect of the early Marx's view, see Brudney, 'Producing for Others'.

The crux of the issue here is how, and in what way, I achieve self-realization. According to the *Comments*, I realize my true nature in labour that is directed at others' needs. According to *Capital III* by contrast, really free activity is done for its own sake, not imposed by the exigencies of need.

IV

In this section, I will examine some of Marx's most illuminating pronouncements on work and freedom under communism, and argue that they reveal that Marx's intellectual development on this matter cannot be understood in terms of a simple shift from an early optimistic position to a later more pessimistic one.

Let me start with the young Marx's 1844 writings. In the same year that Marx wrote the concluding passage to the *Comments*, in which necessary labour is central to the realization of the self, he also developed a philosophical anthropology in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* by drawing a number of contrasts between humans and animals. Particularly relevant to the theme pursued here is the contrast between the necessity of animal production and the potential freedom of its human counterpart:

Admittedly animals also produce ... [But] ... only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom ... Man therefore also forms objects in accordance with the laws of beauty.

(Marx, *Manuscripts*, 276)

According to Marx, both animals and human beings are productive creatures in the sense that they must engage with the external world in order to satisfy their physical needs. But there is something fundamentally different about human production. For although animals and human beings produce, animals only do so when need compels them to, whereas humans can produce in freedom from their physical needs. As the reference to 'the laws of beauty' implies, the paradigm of 'truly' free activity is art: an activity that is undetermined by the pressures and considerations of physical necessity, an end in itself.

The position that Marx outlines in the philosophical anthropology of the *Manuscripts* is at odds with the contemporaneous *Comments*, for in the latter text, Marx explicitly denies that the necessity of labour precludes freedom. However, it fits perfectly with Marx's position in *Capital III*, for on both accounts really free activity is activity that is free from the exigency of need. Of course, this casts serious doubt on whether we can view Marx's intellectual trajectory in terms of a simple shift between an early optimism and later pessimism. For, in his insight into the unalienated essence of man in 1844, Marx makes the same argument that he would return to two decades later. In this way, the underlying tension between these two different

conceptions of the good life, which many commentators have attributed to a distinction between the ‘early’ and ‘late’ Marx, is in fact implicit in Marx’s original position.⁸

Let us now turn our attention to the *Grundrisse*, the unpublished notebooks Marx kept between 1857 and 1858. There, we find the same oscillation between two different conceptions of the good life that was present in the 1844 writings. Thus, on the one hand, in a passage that is congruent with *Capital III* but at odds with the *Comments*, Marx asserts that the real aim of communist society is:

... the free development of individualities, and hence not the reduction of necessary labour so as to posit surplus labour, but rather the reduction of the necessary labour of society to a minimum, which then corresponds to the artistic, scientific, etc. development of the individuals in the time set free.
(Marx, *Grundrisse*, 593)

On this view, it is leisure rather than labour that is the sphere of life in which individuals realize themselves, and the value of communism lies in its shortening of the working-day. As Marx puts it at another point in the same text, ‘to economize on labour time means to increase the amount of free time, i.e. time for the complete development of the individual’ (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 593).

And yet, the *Grundrisse*, like the 1844 writings, contains other lines of thought. For, in a passage that is at odds with *Capital III* but congruent with the *Comments*, Marx claims that while it is true that labour is ‘externally determined by the aim to be attained and the obstacles to its attainment’:

... the overcoming of these obstacles is in itself a manifestation of freedom – and the external aims are stripped of their character as merely external natural necessity, and become posited as aims which only the individual himself posits, that they are therefore posited as self-realisation [*Selbstverwirklichung*], objectification of the object, and thus real freedom, whose action is precisely labour.

(Marx, *Grundrisse*, 530)

Thus, the view that Marx expressed in the 1844 *Comments*, where labour is the central element in the realization of the self, can at least be traced to the *Grundrisse* of 1857–1858.

⁸Further evidence that the germ of the idea Marx expressed in *Capital III* can be traced back to the 1844 writings comes from the ‘Wage-Labour’ section of the Manuscripts, where Marx quotes the German economist and radical democrat Wilhelm Schulz approvingly. Schulz writes, ‘A nation which aims to develop its culture more freely can no longer remain the slave of its material needs ... It needs above all leisure time in which to produce and enjoy culture’ (Marx, *Manuscripts*, 245).

Perhaps, then, Marx oscillated in the 1844 writings, oscillated again in the *Grundrisse* of 1857–1858, but then decisively settled on the so-called ‘pessimistic’ position we have been considering in *Capital III* of 1864–1867, where self-realization is achieved after the necessary work is done. Certainly, this is the view Marx expressed in the 1862–1863 *Theories of Surplus Value*:

Free time, disposable time, is wealth itself, partly for the enjoyment of the product, partly for the free activity which – unlike labour – is not dominated by the pressure of an extraneous purposes which must be fulfilled, and the fulfilment of which is regarded as a natural necessity or a social duty, according to one’s inclinations.

(Marx, *Surplus-Value*, 391)

However, the idea that Marx decisively settled on a ‘pessimistic’ appraisal of labour appears to be compromised by the famous passage from the ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’ (hereafter the ‘Critique’), written in 1875, a decade or so after *Capital III*. There, Marx had described labour in a ‘higher phase of communist society’ as being ‘not only a means of life, but life’s prime want’ (Marx, ‘Critique’, 87).

It might be argued, however, that while this famous quotation could be interpreted as a call back to Marx’s position in the *Comments*, it could also be interpreted as being congruent with Marx’s position in *Capital III*. For the ‘Critique’ might be interpreted as saying that labour will be desirable only in the sense that it will be elevated from its position as an activity of alienated toil under capitalism to that of a collectively affirmed necessity under communism. Communist labour would be desirable, not because it is fully self-realizing, but because in comparison with capitalist labour it offers an opportunity for collective self-determination.

This interpretation cannot be sustained, however, for the labour described by Marx in the ‘Critique’ is not only more desirable than capitalist labour but the pre-eminently desirable activity of communist society; indeed, it is ‘life’s prime want’. Accordingly, Marx does not postulate as the aim of communist society the reduction of labour to a minimum, for labour contains genuinely free activity.⁹

V

There is something intuitively plausible about the standard story of Marx’s intellectual development. According to the standard story, as Marx got older, he came to adopt a more sober and realistic account of communist society, especially with regards to the role of labour within it. The mature Marx, who was less romantic and more learned in economics, came to see

⁹A degree of ambiguity remains, however, since Marx does not specify in this passage why communist labour has become preeminently desirable, that is, why it has become ‘life’s prime want’.

that, while the burden of labour could be reduced, work could not be transformed into an activity of self-realization. Plausible as the standard story is, however, as we have seen it cannot be squared with a careful reading of the texts, which reveals that Marx's intellectual movement on this matter is less simple and more uneven than the standard story suggests.

However, this leaves us with the difficult job of explaining how, and why, this oscillation took place. Of course, any answer to this question must be somewhat speculative, since Marx gives us no clues as to why his views changed in this way. But let me make some tentative remarks, which may, I hope, shed some light on this matter.

The prevailing view in the history of philosophy has seen necessary labour as antithetical to freedom and the good life for man. These ideas can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle, who both argue that the highest type of life for human beings is the contemplative life, and that this correspondingly requires leisure and exemption from necessary labour. Thus, in *The Republic* Plato argues that the philosopher-kings, who govern in virtue of their superior rational endowment, should be free from the performance of necessary labour so as to cultivate their rational capacities more perfectly (Plato, *The Republic*, 369). Similarly, Aristotle recognizes that the maintenance of the polis relies upon labour, but he too considers such activity to be antithetical to a life of the highest form of 'excellence' [arete]. Thus, Aristotle cautions that citizens 'must not lead the life of artisans for such a life is ignoble and inimical to excellence. Neither must they be farmers, since leisure is necessary both for the development of excellence and the performance of political duties.' (Aristotle, *The Politics*, 1328)

Philosophers in the Kantian tradition, though plainly very different in other respects, express similar views on labour. On Kant's view, motivation by need is heteronomy; the free will determines itself in abstraction from all such motivations.¹⁰ Labour, activity directed at needs, represents a form of unfreedom. Whilst post-Kantians typically aimed to soften the austerity of the Kantian picture, they generally continued to define freedom in opposition to need. Schiller, for instance, contrasts really free activity – which he terms 'play' [*spiel*] – with labour. 'An animal' Schiller says, 'may be said to be at work, when the stimulus to activity is some need; it may be said to be at play, when the stimulus is the sheer plenitude of vitality, when superabundance of life is its own incentive to action.' (Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 207). Crucially, on Schiller's view it is play rather than work that leads to self-realization, since it is only in the former activity that the individual engages the whole of their nature.¹¹ Likewise, Fichte sees work as an externally

¹⁰For discussion of this aspect of Kant's thought, see Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, Chapter 8.

¹¹Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 105.

It is precisely play and play alone which of all man's states and conditions is the one which makes him whole ... man only plays when he is in the fullest sense of the word a

imposed natural necessity, which he contrasts with leisure, defined as free time for ‘arbitrary ends’.¹² For Fichte, the aim of society should be to reduce necessary labour to a minimum to correspondingly enlarge the realm of leisure that lies beyond it. The mechanization and division of labour represent positive developments, on Fichte’s view, in so far as they contribute to this end.

Thus, for the prevailing view in the history of philosophy freedom from work is necessary if human beings are to develop the highest aspects of their nature. This view can, however, be contrasted with a second line of thought, which has seen necessary labour in a more positive light: not as precluding freedom but as potentially enhancing it.

The key figure here is Hegel. Hegel’s most famous discussion of labour comes in the master-slave dialectic in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where he famously argues that it is the slave who works on the world rather than the master who merely consumes what has been made for him who realizes the higher degree of freedom. By working to satisfy his master’s needs, Hegel argues, the slave comes to control his own desires, while also developing a sense of self by fashioning an object that is not immediately consumed but worked upon and transformed. ‘Through the rediscovery of himself by himself’, Hegel says, ‘the bondsman realizes that it is precisely in his work wherein he seemed to have an alienated existence that he acquires a mind of his own’ (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 118–119).

These themes are developed further in the discussion of social labour in the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel argues that although social labour is conditioned by needs it can nevertheless betoken freedom. Hegel emphasizes the fact that in the modern world a worker’s product does not typically satisfy their own needs but is ‘strictly adapted ... to the enjoyment [i.e. needs] of others’ (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §199, 233). Far from seeing this as an unfree aspect of modern labour, however, Hegel argues that working for others is potentially liberating. By working to satisfy the needs of others rather than merely consuming what is present in their immediate environment, the worker is liberated from the ‘immediacy’ of his natural condition. Furthermore, by working to satisfy others’ needs, workers are forced out of their particular standpoint and made to adopt a more social outlook – one which takes into consideration not just their own needs but also those of others – in their productive activity. Crucially, Hegel thinks that it is only by adopting this more social outlook that

human being, and he is only a human being when he plays.

It is also hard to resist a comparison between Marx’s contrast between the ‘realm of necessity’ and the ‘realm of freedom’ with Schiller’s contrast between a ‘State of compulsion’ [*Staat der Not*] and a ‘State of freedom’ [*Staat der Freiheit*] (Schiller, *Aesthetic Education*, 23).

¹²Quoted from David James, *Rousseau and German Idealism*, 210.

individuals can overcome their alienation from the social world (Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §192, 230).¹³

We can, therefore, distinguish two different lines of thought on work and freedom in the history of philosophy: the prevailing view which sees the best type of human life as being free from necessary labour, and an Hegelian view which sees necessary labour as potentially freedom-enhancing. What I now want to suggest is that we can situate Marx's oscillation between two different conceptions of labour within these two traditions in his history of philosophy.

In arguing, as he does in *Capital III*, that truly free activity can only take place outside of necessary labour, Marx put forward a thesis that was broadly congruent with the prevailing view in the history of philosophy. To be sure, the Marx of *Capital III* would reject aspects of that view. For instance, he would reject the idea – central to Plato and Aristotle – that the supreme human life is one of contemplation. Equally, he would reject the Kantian view that necessary labour – insofar as it constitutes motivation by needs – is completely lacking in freedom. For the Marx of *Capital III*, by contrast, the good life consists in creative activity and, although the 'realm of necessity' cannot be fully free, it can nevertheless contain a form of freedom. However, in putting forward the shortening of the working-day as the chief aspiration of communist society, as he did in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx accepted the key thought running through these otherwise disparate works in the history of philosophy, namely, that the highest aspects of our nature are developed outside the realm of necessary labour. To put things another way, while Marx disagreed with philosophers in the prevailing view about what the good life consisted in, he agreed that freedom from work was the condition most congenial to it.

The conception of the good life in the *Comments*, by contrast, contains a more fundamental rejection of the prevailing view in the history of philosophy. For, in that text, Marx rejects the claim that it is life outside labour that is the true realm of freedom and fulfilment. On the contrary, it is labour that constitutes real freedom, the good life for man. This also constituted a more Hegelian position. For, in the master-slave dialectic, and in the discussion of social labour in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel had argued that although labour is determined by social needs, it could nevertheless be a free and self-realizing activity. This surely influenced Marx's idea that though 'the volume of labour itself appears to be externally determined by the aim to be attained ... the overcoming of these obstacles is in itself a

¹³This point is expressed by Michael Hardimon, who emphasizes the role of self-transformation in Hegel's reconciliation of individual and society. Part of the process of reconciliation, Hardimon argues, involves a transformation of consciousness where one moves (in Hardimon's terms) from an initial state in which one regards oneself as an 'atomic individual' to a state in which one regards oneself as an 'individual social member'. For Hegel, social labour contributes towards that end. Michael Hardimon, *Hegel's Social Theory: The Project of Reconciliation*, 140–143.

manifestation of freedom' – not only freedom, we should add, but 'real freedom', 'self-realization' (Marx, *Grundrisse*, 530). Indeed, Marx is quite explicit about his debt to Hegel in this regard. 'The importance and final result of Hegel's *Phenomenology*', says Marx, 'lies in the fact that it grasps the nature of labour' (Marx, *Manuscripts*, 276).¹⁴

My suggestion, then, as to why Marx oscillates between these two models of unalienated labour is that he was influenced by two different lines of thought in the history of philosophy. At times, he endorsed the Hegelian idea that though labour remains determined by social need, it can nevertheless constitute real freedom. At other times, however, Marx was less Hegelian and more conventional, that is, he put forward an account of self-realization in leisure, an account that had much more in common with the prevailing view in the history of philosophy, which has seen life outside labour as the true realm of freedom and fulfilment.

VI

In this paper, I have been concerned with the exegetical question of how, and in what way, Marx's views on work and freedom change during the course of his lifetime. But Marx's oscillation between two different conceptions of the good life also raises a number of non-exegetical questions, which are of interest in relation to his own philosophy but also more generally. These questions include which of the two accounts provides the more feasible and desirable foundation for a Marxist vision of the good life. They also include the question of whether the two visions of the good life could be brought together and harmonized. There is no space to explore these questions fully here; but in what follows, I provide a brief comment on these issues.

For some commentators, the vision of the good life Marx puts forward in *Capital III* represents a less utopian and more realistic account of communist society, where Marx finally comes to terms with what is actually possible within the confines of a modern economy.¹⁵ Work is not 'life's prime want' on this model, but it is rationally planned, and it leaves plenty of time for us to pursue other activities, in leisure, which are more conducive to self-realization.

Marx's position in *Capital III* seems to me unsatisfactory, however. The first problem concerns the claim that work inescapably belongs to the 'realm of necessity', which cannot, in consequence, be fully free. But why cannot necessary work be fully free and self-realizing? As G.A. Cohen argues, there is no reason why an activity cannot be both necessary and fulfilling: eating can be enjoyable despite being necessary, and cooking can be

¹⁴This is not to say that Marx accepts Hegel's account of labour in every detail. In particular, Marx criticises Hegel for the way in which he 'sees only the positive and not the negative side of labour' (Marx, *Manuscripts*, 276).

¹⁵For one such argument, see Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class*.

extremely rewarding (Cohen, 'Marx's Dialectic of Labour', 261). To be sure, the 'realm of necessity' will be with us under all conditions and all social formations. But it does not follow that it will therefore never be really fulfilling.

Furthermore, I think we can also question the desirability of a 'realm of freedom', free from necessity and determination. One problem is motivational: why will communist workers strive to develop their powers in the realm of freedom? According to Marx's theory of history, man has developed his powers in the struggle with necessity, by striving to meet one another's basic needs. Commentating on earlier phases of history, Marx had argued that, on those rare occasions when nature has provided man with the necessities of life, she [nature]:

'keeps him in hand, like a child in leading-strings'. She does not impose upon him any necessity to develop himself ... It is the necessity of bringing a natural force under the control of society ... that first plays the decisive part in the history of industry.

(Marx, *Capital I*, 515)

Historically, Marx argues, man has developed his powers through the struggle with necessity. But as the communist working-day contracts, and the realm of leisurely abundance grows, what will provide man with the impetus to develop his powers in the future? Indeed, this problem seems to signal a larger issue at the heart of the picture of the good life that Marx develops in *Capital III*, namely, that by defining freedom in contrast to necessity, so that 'real' freedom consists in activity that is undetermined by external pressures and considerations, Marx's realm of freedom ends up looking rather empty and arbitrary.

If Marx's position in *Capital III* is unduly pessimistic about what is attainable in necessary labour, Marx's position in the *Comments* would appear to suffer from the opposite shortcoming of being overly optimistic that all labour can be transformed into a fulfilling activity. For, in truth, necessary labour varies greatly in kind. Some is creative and intrinsically pleasurable, and thus it would be wrong to suggest, as Marx does in *Capital III*, that labour qua labour cannot be intrinsically satisfying. Other forms of labour, however, seem to be inherently unattractive, on account of their being physically dangerous, fatiguing, mind-numbingly dull and so on, and thus it would seem wrong to suggest, as Marx does in the *Comments*, that all work can give rise to a rich development of human powers.

The Marx of the *Comments* does have some lines of response at his disposal, however. For instance, he could point out that even though the work itself may not be intrinsically pleasurable, the worker could still get a degree of fulfilment from the knowledge that they had performed a worthwhile role for society: that is, from the knowledge that they 'had satisfied a human need' in their work. Alternatively, Marx could point out that unattractive labour will not be experienced as 'alienation' under communism,

because it will be equitably distributed across society as a whole, so that no one individual has to spend their entire working life performing the same, soul-destroying task. Equally, Marx could point out that though some unpleasant labour remains under communism, all individuals would also have the opportunity to engage in other, more creative forms of work.

Let us briefly consider the final question, whether the two visions of the good life could be harmonized. One way in which this could be achieved would be to collapse the distinction – firmly recognized in the third volume of *Capital* – between labour and leisure. Perhaps this is one of the things Marx has in mind in when he says that communist man will ‘hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind.’ (Marx, *The German Ideology*, 47). Under communism, a gloss on this passage might run, individuals realize themselves in varied activities that are freely chosen, done for their own sake, and in the individual’s own time.

The problem with this solution is not that it is impossible to imagine how any forms of work could transcend the distinction between work and leisure; indeed, academia may provide an example of what Marx has in mind, insofar as academics find it hard to think of their research as fitting straightforwardly into the category of ‘work’ or ‘leisure’. Rather, the problem is that it is incredibly hard to see how some forms of work (the work done maintaining a sewer, for example) could transcend the distinction between work and leisure in the way that Marx might be seen to suggest. For although such activities are socially important they are not ones that individuals would willingly or freely perform, for their own sake, and in their own time, on account of the horrible conditions in which they must be performed. The distinction between work and leisure therefore looks entrenched.

What this does not rule out, however, is a more moderate reconciliation between these two visions of the good life, which would preserve the distinction between work and leisure, but see the good life as containing activities in both realms. On the view I am imagining, individuals could realize their social nature by fulfilling a worthwhile role for society in their labour, and supplement the rich development of their powers and capacities in their free time. Something along these lines would appear to represent a coherent middle-way between the two conceptions of the good life that Marx oscillated between throughout his lifetime.¹⁶

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