"Historical Materialism: Marx"

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Abstract: This chapter discusses the philosophical side of Marx's thought as well as some of the major debates about it in the secondary literature. It is organized into three sections. The first examines Marx's early writings, focusing, in particular, on his views on religion, the limitations of political emancipation and the dehumanizing conditions of work under capitalism. The second examines Marx's materialist theory of history, the view that history is characterized by the development of productive power to free people from material scarcity. The third examines the problematic area of Marx's ethics. Marx's remarks on this topic are scattered and unsystematic. Consequently, they generate a number of difficult questions about how, and in what way, he criticizes capitalism. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Marx's vision of the good life under communism.

Keywords: Marx; Early Writings; History; Ethics; Capitalism; Communism.

1. Introduction: Marx's Life and Work

Karl Marx was born in Trier, in the south-west of the Rhineland, in 1818. He initially studied law at the University of Bonn, but upon transferring to the University of Berlin, he came into contact with the young Hegelians, a group of left-wing thinkers who drew radical and atheistic conclusions from Hegel's thought, and switched to philosophy, writing a doctoral thesis comparing Democritus and Epicurus. In the first two works I discuss here, 'On the Jewish Question' and 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction', we find Marx begin to formulate criticisms of young Hegelian positions and develop his own distinct view.

In late 1843 Marx left Germany for Paris. Marx's stay in France was short-lived but momentous nevertheless: it was there that he became a communist, mixed with workers for the first time, got to know a number of famous figures in the international socialist movement, and wrote the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,* a text that was never intended for publication but became famous for its humanist critique of capitalism. In Brussels in the spring of 1845 Marx wrote the 'Theses on Feuerbach', a series of eleven epigrammatic notes that provide a rare insight into his philosophical views. It was also in Brussels that he collaborated with Friedrich Engels on two of his best-known texts: *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto.* The former, unpublished in Marx's lifetime, contains the first statement of the materialist theory of history; the latter, written on the eve of the 1848 revolutions, contains a number of famous slogans and memorable metaphors but is probably more important in theoretical terms for correcting the resilient misinterpretation that its authors were unremittingly hostile to capitalism.

From 1849 Marx lived in exile in London. His major theoretical accomplishment during this

time was the first volume of *Capital*, published in 1867 (the second and third volumes were edited and published posthumously by Engels). However, with regards to the philosophical side of his thought a number of other texts also merit attention. In particular, the G*rundrisse*, a collection of texts written in 1857-58 but only published in 1939, provides strong evidence that the humanist themes of the early writings do not disappear in the later economic writings; the Preface to the 1859 *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, contains the canonical statement of the materialist theory of history; and the 1875 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' gives a rare insight into Marx's views on the topic of distributive justice and communism. Marx died in London in 1883.[1]

Before we look at Marx's ideas in more detail, a quick word about his relationship with communism. After the Russian revolution of 1917 Marx's name became practically synonymous with it. But in reality the proximity of Marx's ideas to actually-existing communism was always contestable: while Marx's writings are certainly not free of problematic elements – some of these will become apparent in the subsequent discussion of his attitude towards 'bourgeois ideals' of right and justice – no fair-minded reader of Marx's texts could see the Soviet Union as an authentic embodiment of the society he predicted or desired. In any case, this chapter aims to provide a sober assessment of Marx's contribution to philosophy, not history. Arguably, the fall of communism, and slow settling of ideological dust surrounding these issues, ought to provide a congenial context for this enterprise.

The chapter is organized into three sections. The first examines Marx's early writings. These writings contain Marx's most overtly philosophical output as well as his most significant engagement with the ideas of other philosophers. The second examines the materialist theory of history, the view that history is characterized by the development of productive power to free people from material scarcity. The third examines the problematic area of Marx's ethics. Marx's remarks on this topic are scattered and systematic. Consequently, they generate a number of difficult questions about how, and in what way, he criticizes capitalism and advocates its replacement by communism.

2. Early Writings

Commentators typically identify the early writings with the work Marx produced from 1843 to the Autumn of 1845, the time when he and Engels began work on *The German Ideology,* a group of texts that contains the first statement of the materialist theory of history and is, for that reason, often seen as the termination of Marx's early period. The early writings consist of a mixture of published and unpublished material, including, it is important to note, drafts never intended for publication. They are quite varied thematically. Topics include religion, philosophy, the limitations of political emancipation and the dehumanizing conditions of work in modern capitalist societies.

The early writings have a complex publication history (Leopold 2007, 1-8). While there is no space to discuss this in detail, one important point is that the bulk of these writings remained unpublished or at least widely unavailable until the early 1930s, and were only translated into English in the late 1950s. The late publication of the early writings sparked a

1 For further discussion of Marx's life and work, see Stedman-Jones (2016).

controversial debate about their relation to Marx's later output. On this question two views formed. The first found the early writings incompatible with Marx's later work. The most famous proponent of this view was the French philosopher Louis Althusser, who claimed to find an 'epistemological break' between Marx's 'humanist' and 'scientific' writings (Althusser 1969). Others, however, argued that Marx's writings form a coherent body of work (Avineri 1970; McLellan 1971). In particular, this second group of commentators, who also tended to emphasize the influence of Hegel on Marx, argued that the humanist themes of the early writings persist into Marx's later economic and political works, notwithstanding some change of focus and terminology. My own view is that there is no fundamental break from the early to the later writings, and that at least some of the tensions that commentators have attributed to this break are implicit in Marx's philosophical position (Kandiyali 2014). Some of these tensions will become apparent in the discussion of Marx's ethics.

2.1. The Critique of Religion

The best way to introduce some of the characteristic concerns of the early writings is through Marx's contribution to young Hegelian debates about religion.[2]

While these debates can be traced back to Hegel, Marx's contribution is set against the backdrop of Ludwig Feuerbach's influential work *The Essence of Christianity.* In that work Feuerbach sought to debunk the Christian view of God as a supernatural entity. His central claim is that the Christian account of Genesis inverts the true relationship between subject and predicate: rather than God creating man, the reality is that man creates God. More precisely, human beings project their best and most truly human qualities – their species-essence – onto a fictitious entity which they then mistakenly worship as an independent and omnipotent being, making themselves feel weak, sinful and stupid by way of comparison. In Feuerbach's view, therefore, religion is the primary barrier to human flourishing, and it must be overcome if human beings are to enjoy their essence for themselves.

In 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction' Marx makes plain that he agrees with Feuerbach's account of religion: in Germany, he says, the criticism of religion is complete (Marx 1975, 243). However, Marx thinks that Feuerbach's analysis needs to be taken further. More precisely, while Marx accepts Feuerbach's view that man creates religion, he criticizes Feuerbach for failing to ask, let alone explain, what he takes to be the more fundamental question – why do people create religion in the first instance? Taking up this question, Marx argues that that people create religion because the conditions of the modern social world prevent people from actualizing their essence in their real life: 'Religion is the fantastic realization of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true actuality' (Marx 1975, 244). And while the 'fantastic realization' of the human essence is illusory, it does at least provide people with a kind of solace, a numbing of the pain of everyday life. It is for this reason that Marx describes religion as the 'sigh of an oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world...the soul of soulless conditions...the opium of the people' (Marx 1975, 244).

Marx's view that religion has its root in material conditions generates a further disagreement

2 For more detailed discussion, see Todd Gooch's entry in this volume.

between himself and Feuerbach over the practical question of how religion should be transcended. Because Feuerbach considers religion to be a form of false consciousness, he believes that religion can be overcome through criticism. However, because Marx thinks that religious illusion is generated by the unhappiness of the social world, his view is that criticizing religion will be a pointless and maybe even harmful move, like depriving a patient the painkiller that admittedly does nothing at all to cure their disease but at least makes their life minimally bearable. Rather than criticizing religion, humanists should criticize a social world that generates the need for religion. For religion will be overcome only when, and to the extent that, there ceases to be a need for the solace it provides, and this requires thoroughgoing change, not in human consciousness, but in social, political and, above all else, economic conditions: 'Religious estrangement as such takes place only in the sphere of consciousness, of man's inner life, but economic estrangement is that of *real life* – its supersession therefore embraces both aspects' (Marx 1975, 349; see also Marx 1975, 422).

Before moving on, it is worth emphasizing that Marx's account of religion is somewhat more complex and less hostile than it is often portrayed. In particular, Marx does not argue that religion is concocted to subdue the masses. Neither does he see religion as the primary barrier to human flourishing. Rather, Marx argues that religion is created by the believers themselves, and that the real barriers to human flourishing are found in economic conditions. Moreover, it is striking that Marx counsels against criticizing religion: if religion is to be overcome, it must wither away of its own accord. Of course, this is not to say that religion is an entirely benign force, for although it realizes the human essence, it does so in an illusory and hence inadequate way. But for Marx, unlike Feuerbach, the real problems lie elsewhere.

2.2. The Limits of Political Emancipation

A second major theme of the early writings concerns Marx's complex assessment of what he calls 'political emancipation', by which he means the granting of equal civil and political rights, and by which he contrasts with the potent but elusive ideal of human emancipation.

The immediate context for Marx's foray into this issue is the more specific issue of Jewish emancipation – that is, the issue of whether the state should eliminate restrictions on Jewish participation in civil institutions. While most opponents of Jewish emancipation came from the conservative right, a more complex form of opposition came from within the atheistic left of which Marx was himself part. In particular, in two articles from 1842 and 1843, Marx's former teacher and mentor, Bruno Bauer, had argued against Jewish emancipation on atheistic grounds. His central claim is that it is not possible for Jews – or indeed followers of any faith – to enjoy equal civil and political freedoms while they remain religious. As Marx himself summarized this view in his reply essay 'On the Jewish Question':

> '...Bauer demands on the one hand that the Jew give up Judaism and that man in general give up religion in order to be emancipated as a *citizen*. On the other hand, it follows logically that for him the *political* abolition of religion amounts to the abolition of religion as a whole ' (Marx 1975, 215).

To begin with, Marx's takes issue with Bauer's claim that in order to be politically emancipated one must renounce one's religion. In reply, Marx claims that this does not tally

with the empirical evidence. The United States provides a counter-example. There, says Marx, 'there is neither state religion nor an officially proclaimed religion of the majority, nor the preponderance of one faith of one another'. Nevertheless, the US remains the 'land of religiosity *par excellence*' (Marx 1975, 217). Indeed, 'in the land of complete political emancipation we find not only that religion exists but that it exists in a *fresh* and *vigorous* form' (Marx 1975, 217). As such, Marx claims that there is nothing incoherent in the Jewish demand for political emancipation, no reason why Jews must renounce their Judaism in order to equal rights: 'we do not tell the Jews that they cannot be emancipated politically without radically emancipating themselves from Judaism, which is what Bauer tells them' (Marx 1975, 226). On this issue, it is once again Marx, rather than his young Hegelian contemporaries, who occupies the more liberal position.

Taking his argument further, however, Marx argues that the fact that political emancipation is compatible with religion reveals a flaw in the nature of political emancipation itself: 'The limitations of political emancipation are immediately apparent from the fact that the *state* can liberate itself from a restriction without man himself being *truly* free of it' (Marx 1975, 218). This is an important point. The immediate claim is that the state can liberate itself from religion even when people remain religious, but Marx is aware that this point generalizes to other domains. For instance, the state 'abolishes distinctions based on '*birth, rank, education* and *occupation*' when it 'proclaims that every member of the people is an equal participant in popular sovereignty regardless of these distinctions', but this does not mean that birth, rank, education and occupation cease to exert a pervasive effect on people's lives (Marx 1975, 219). We might say the same about racial and sexual discrimination too. For some time western democracies have made a serious effort to create laws that do not discriminate on the basis of race or sex, and while significant progress has been made, no one could argue that we have achieved real equality here.

In fact, all political emancipation really does is transfer the defects of the social world from the political to the non-political domain. The fact that the modern state is 'foreign to all faiths' does not mean that the people are free of religion; it simply means people are religious in private. Similarly, the fact that one's political rights are not conditional on property holdings does not mean that society is free from private property. By granting people equal rights irrespective of their particular identities, political emancipation eliminates a defect from the state. But in civil society, which is our more fundamental level of existence, such defects remain intact.

What, then, is Marx's view of political emancipation? What I have said so far may suggest the following answer: political emancipation is good but not enough. It is good because it removes discrimination from the state; it is not enough because it fails to remove discrimination from civil society. What is required is a more thoroughgoing change in both spheres – a change that human emancipation will provide.

Now, there is no doubt that Marx sees political emancipation as good, for he commends it in no uncertain terms as a 'big step forward' (Marx 1975, 221). His critique of political emancipation is not blind to the fact that the achievement of civil and political rights is a major historical accomplishment – one that reflects a deep human need to stand on equal

terms with their fellows. However, the critique of political emancipation in the remainder of 'On the Jewish Question' proceeds in a more radical direction, and depending where one stands on Marx it is either the place where he produces a fatal objection to the notion of political emancipation, or the place where he takes his conclusion too far. For Marx's claim is that not only does political emancipation fall short of human emancipation; it is also a barrier to the achievement of human emancipation. To make this claim, Marx invites us to consider the 'rights of man' as they are enshrined in the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen of 1791 and in the constitutions of various North American states. These documents contain a catalogue of rights to such things as liberty, equality, security and private property. They are the kind of rights liberals cherish. But taking them in turn, Marx argues that every one of these rights implies an atomistic view of human relations – one that is antithetical to true community and human emancipation. Consider the right to liberty. Anticipating J.S. Mill, Marx interprets this as a 'right to do and perform everything which does not harm others' (Marx 1975, 229). This sounds unobjectionable. Yet Marx points out that this right to implies that people are at risk from their fellows, that they therefore require protection against them, and that they themselves may wish to act in ways that harm others. Consequently, this right encourages 'each man to see in other men not the *realization* but the *limitation* of his own freedom' (Marx 1975, 230). Hence in Marx's view, the rights of man presuppose, and so in some way intensify, the defects of liberal capitalist society. Thus, although the doctrine of political emancipation is certainly an advance on what preceded it, it is also deficient and perhaps also an obstacle in the creation of a good society.

Two interpretive issues have dominated discussion of 'On The Jewish Question'. The first is whether the early Marx's criticism of rights should be read as signaling his hostility to the idea of rights as such. While 'On the Jewish Question' might seem to give support for this view, commentators have plausibly pointed out that Marx's critical remarks in that text are directed only against the content of a particular sub-set of rights, namely the 'rights of man', rather than the 'rights of citizen' or rights as such (Leopold 2007, 150–163).[3] The second is whether Marx's position in 'On the Jewish Question' is anti-Semitic. In the second part of the essay, which has not been discussed here, Marx makes a number of problematic remarks associating Jews with the spirit of 'money-making', 'huckstering' and 'egoism'. In Marx's partial defense, however, it has been argued that Marx employs the negative characteristics associated with Jews to condemn the self-interested behavior of all members of civil society, regardless of their religious commitments and national, ethnic, or racial, background (Leopold 2007, 163–180).

2.3. Alienated Labor

Of all the topics of the early writings, the most famous is the account of alienated labor from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts.* However, it requires some philosophical work in order to locate it.

At the most general level, alienation refers to a state of unnatural separation where one is

3 In addition, one could also argue that Marx's criticisms of the rights of man cannot be generalized to contemporary theories of human rights, since the latter contain rights (e.g. to education, healthcare, leisure, etc,.) that are not egoistic in the way Marx censures.

cut-off from something that one should not be cut-off from. To say this implies that there is something that individuals should live in harmony with, a state of affairs that is rational or good. However, it does not follow that human beings have once enjoyed this harmony, that they have 'fallen' from some original condition to which they must return. As we shall see, it is Marx's idea that it is only with capitalism that an unalienated life becomes possible, at least on a large-scale.

To get a further fix on Marx's idea of alienation, we can begin with the distinction between its objective and subjective variants (Hardimon 1994, 119–122). Objective alienation obtains when one is unable to live an unalienated life on account of some particular feature of the social world. These features include material conditions (e.g. poverty) and social norms (e.g. racism). Objective alienation, so understood, can be ascribed to people independently of what they think. Subjective alienation, by contrast, is a psychological condition: to be subjectively alienated is to believe that one's social world is not a home. This belief may be true or false, but, in either case, subjective alienation is nevertheless real. Typically, objective alienation and subjective alienation will come in tandem, but they can also come apart. For instance, one could be objectively alienated but not subjectively alienated – for example because one takes solace in consoling religious illusions, or because ideology obscures one's true predicament. And conversely, one could be objectively unalienated yet still experience subjective alienation – for example because one has the false belief that one's social world is objectively alienated.

Both objective and subjective alienation feature heavily in Marx's account. However, Marx affords causal priority to the notion of objective alienation, in that he thinks that subjective alienation typically (though not always) tracks objective alienation: it is because labor is alienated under capitalism that people experience subjective alienation. In this sense objective alienation is, for Marx, the more basic evil.

With these distinctions in mind, let us now turn to the account of alienated labor. As is well-known, Marx describes workers as suffering from four aspects of alienation under capitalism. The first aspect is the alienation of workers from the product of their labor. Marx describes this condition as follows:

> 'The externalization [*entäusserung*] of the worker in his product means not only that his labour becomes an object, an *external* existence, but that it exists *outside him*, independently of him and alien to him, and begins to confront him as an autonomous power' (Marx 1975, 324)

Statements such as these abound in Marx's writings – early and late.[4] They are not to be understood literally. When Marx describes workers as 'dominated by the product of their labor', he does not mean that workers are dominated by the particular objects they worked on – be they clothes, cars, pieces of furniture or whatever. What he has in mind, rather, is that in creating a product, workers are simultaneously producing – or perhaps better to say, reproducing – a mode of production that dominates them. Workers must sell their labor-

4 In *Capital*, Marx describes this phenomena under the heading of the 'Fetishism of Commodities'.

power to survive, but their labor generates profit for capitalists and so sustains an economic organization that is antithetical to their well-being. It is in this metaphorical sense that workers are dominated by the 'product' of their labor. Of course, this is not how it appears to the workers themselves, for they do not realize that capitalism is their 'product'. Rather, they see the economy as something alien, independent and hostile. But the reality is that the forces that dominate them, far from being truly alien, emanate from their collective activity.

The second aspect concerns the alienation of the worker, not from the product of their labor, but from their productive activity. Under capitalism, 'labor is *external* to the worker' (Marx 1975, 326). Far from being an activity through which he affirms himself, labor under capitalism 'mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind' (Marx 1975, 326). 'The result', writes Marx, 'is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions – eating, drinking procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment – while in his human functions he is nothing more than an animal' (Marx 1975, 327).

The third aspect concerns the alienation of the worker from their own nature. To make this claim, Marx begins by defining the essential characteristics of human beings and then argues that workers are unable to actualize these characteristics under capitalism. Like many philosophers before him, Marx problematically attempts to define human nature by searching for the property that distinguishes humans from animals. As is well-known, Marx associates this distinguishing characteristic with productive activity – that is, with activity that transforms nature to meet human needs. However, it is important to be clear that what distinguishes humans from animals is not production *per se* – after all animals are also capable of transforming nature to meet needs – but the ability to produce in a free, conscious, and, above all, highly creative fashion:

> Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty' (Marx 1975, 329).

It is this view of human nature – as being essentially free, conscious and creative – that informs Marx's most basic critique of capitalism. The critique is simply that capitalism is at odds with human nature. For under capitalism the majority of people do not have jobs that are free, conscious and creative. Rather, they toil in jobs that are meaningless and mind-numbingly dull. Their only real opportunity for free development is in leisure, but they are too exhausted and impoverished from toil to make profitable use of that either.

The fourth aspect is the alienation of workers from other individuals. We may think that what Marx has in mind here is the alienation of workers from capitalists: what *The Communist Manifesto* describes as 'two great hostile camps' of the modern era (Marx and Engels 2000, 246). But Marx is equally concerned with the alienation of workers from other individuals. For instance, he laments how competition for jobs between workers is often 'considerable, unnatural and violent' (Marx 1975, 285), and how workers and consumers typically view each other, not as reciprocally contributing to each other's self-realization, but as mere means for the achievement of their egoistic ends (Marx 1975, 274).

While the broad outlines of Marx's account of alienated labor are reasonably clear, the account generates a number of questions that resist easy answers. One of these concerns the causes of alienation. If alienated labor is to expose a defect in capitalism, Marx needs to show that alienated labor is caused by capitalism – or, more precisely, by a specific and eliminable feature of it. However, Marx's account of the cause of alienated labor is less clear than we might expect. The problem is not that he fails to identify a cause, but that he identifies several and does not clarify the relation between them. As one commentator puts it, 'sometimes he spoke of alienation as if it arose from private ownership of the means of production, sometimes as if it came with a certain kind of division of labor, and sometimes as if it were a consequence of commodity production or a market economy' (Plamenatz 1975, 147). Furthermore, it is not obvious that capitalism is responsible for all of the features of alienated labor that Marx described. Arguably, some degree of alienation is inherent in the nature of large-scale industrial production, regardless of whether it is carried out under capitalism. In general, then, it is fair to say that many commentators have been left unpersuaded by Marx's claims concerning the causes of alienation.

A second question arises from Marx's view that alienation, though present to some degree in earlier forms of society, is especially acute under capitalism. It is not immediately clear why this should be. After all, many earlier forms of society involved various forms of drudgery. The answer is that alienation has some connection to human potential, in that the level of alienation that obtains within a particular society can be measured by the gap that exists between human potential and its degree of realization – that is, the gap between what human life is and what it might be, given the present level of social and technological development (Wood 2004, 44-48). Now, under capitalism the gap becomes very wide indeed. For capitalism contributes to an enormous expansion of human potential, chiefly by contributing to the development of new technology that could allow people to focus on something beyond physical survival, while at the same time actively fettering the actualization of this potential by creating jobs that severely stunt workers' development. In Marx's view, therefore, alienation is especially acute under capitalism, not necessarily because the labor it generates is worse than that under previous modes of production, but because human potential is greater and so frustrated to a higher degree.

A third question concerns the kind of criticism that alienation entails. Reading the early Marx one might get the impression that alienation is a purely negative condition. However, that would be a mistake (Cohen 1988, 183–209; Sayers 2011, 78–81). To be sure, alienated labor is not a desirable state of affairs, but it does have a positive side to it, at least from a historical point of view. We have just seen one aspect of this: alienation is an effect of progress, in that it only reaches its peak when human potential is at a high level. But alienation, as well as being an effect of progress, is also a spur to progress, in that the fact that workers under capitalism typically experience subjective alienation, not only shows them to have an unblinkered view of their condition – a view that their pre-capitalist counterparts did not have – but also provides them with an impetus to change their circumstances and find a mode of production in tune with their nature.

Finally, there is also the question of the place of Marx's notion of alienation within the history

of philosophy. This is a very large question that I cannot do justice to here. However, my view is that we can best grasp Marx's idea of alienation if we see it as containing a mixture of post-Kantian and Aristotelian themes. The post-Kantian theme is most explicit in the first category of alienated labor – alienation from the product. As we have seen, the basic idea here is of people being dominated by products of their own making that they do not recognize as being of their own making. This idea of alienation draws on core themes from Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in particular the idea that spirit or mind externalizes itself in the world and then mistakenly sees these various forms of externalization as foreign and hostile, and even more clearly on Feuerbach's view that in religion the human essence is projected on to a divine being that then dominates its creators by making them feel weak, sinful, and so on. Marx's notion of alienation form the product is, in effect, a generalization of the structure of this critique to the major institutions of the modern capitalist economy. The Aristotelian theme, by contrast, is most explicit in the third category of alienation – alienation from our species-essence. For Marx's idea here clearly relies on the Aristotelian idea that the good life is one spent exercising and developing our distinctly human characteristics, and that a social order that fails to allow us to develop those characteristics is seriously flawed. Both of these ideas reappear in Marx's vision of communism: the post-Kantian theme in the idea that communism will allow individuals to exercise full conscious control over the economic forces that once dominated them, the Aristotelian theme in the idea that communism will enable an unprecedented flourishing of human nature.

2.4. Critique of Philosophy

Marx never provided a detailed discussion of his own philosophical position. As is frequently the case, his view has to be reconstructed from the criticisms he makes of others. The 'Theses on Feuerbach' is an important text here. There, in eleven terse theses, Marx criticizes Feuerbach's materialism and Hegel's idealism, and, in consequence, provides a major insight into his own view.

In Thesis I Marx distinguishes his own materialism from 'hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included)' (Marx 1975, 421). In short, Marx commends materialism for correctly understanding the physical nature of the external world, but criticizes it for viewing the human subject in an entirely passive manner. What materialism overlooks, in Marx's view, is that human beings are not mere passive recipients of an external world that is simply given, but are active in creating and re-creating that world through their own labor. As Marx and Engels would put this point in *The German Ideology*: 'The sensuous world around is not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state and society...the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the previous one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system according to the changed needs' (Marx and Engels 2000, 190). Marx credits Hegelian idealism, by contrast, for this insight into the active role of the subject in constituting the world it inhabits, but criticizes it, in turn, for conceiving of 'activity' in a purely mental way. As Marx puts this (rather unfair) criticism elsewhere, the 'only labor Hegel knows is *abstract mental* labor' (Marx 1975, 386). Bringing the insights of materialism and idealism together, then, Marx comes to the view where human beings are continually engaged in transforming the world through their productive activity, in a process that also transforms their own nature. As we shall see, this idea forms the core of Marx's

materialist theory of history.

In Thesis III Marx considers the determinist view that people simply the 'products of their circumstances', in particular of their upbringing and education. Change someone's education and upbringing, so the story goes, and you change the person. Something like this is often thought to be Marx's view, but he considers it to be a facile view of social change. The problem Marx identifies can be put in the form of a question: How, according to this view, is it possible to change people's circumstances? After all, if everyone is similarly determined, who can do the educating? To overcome this problem, proponents of this doctrine must 'divide society into two parts': those who are determined by their circumstances on the one hand, and those who can rise above this determination to educate the rest on the other. Yet this answer, Marx observes, is inconsistent with the core claim of determinism.

While it is clear that Marx rejects crude determinism, however, his own view is less clear. How is human nature to be transformed? If not by enlightened educators, how? Whereas the first thesis emphasizes that the external world is transformed by human activity, the third thesis emphasizes the complementary point – which Marx also attributes to Hegel – that it is in the changing of their circumstances that subjects simultaneously change themselves. In the third thesis, the emphasis is on the change enacted by revolutionary activity. This idea is not developed further in the 'Theses on Feuerbach', but we get an idea on what Marx has in mind in an interesting passage in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,* where he discusses associations of workers he witnessed in Paris in 1844. These workers initially gather together for egoistic reasons, for example to organize for better pay. However, as a result of their association, 'they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means has become an end....Company, association, conversation, which in its turn has society as its goal, is enough for them' (Marx 1975, 365). In other words, the qualities necessary for socialism are formed in the struggle for socialism.

In Thesis VI Marx writes 'the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 1975, 423). This remark is often cited as evidence that Marx came to reject the idea of human nature. According to this interpretation, there is no human nature as such; rather, what human beings are at any particular moment in time is fully determined by the 'ensemble of the social relations' (Althusser 1969, 227–228). Like much of the *Theses*, Thesis VI is ambiguous and open to different interpretations. However, there are good reasons for doubting that, in describing human nature as the 'ensemble of the social relations', Marx was rejecting human nature as such (Geras 1983). One point is that the anti-human nature reading sees Marx as committed to the view that human nature is fully determined by social relations. However, this is the view that Marx criticizes in Theses I and III for viewing the subject in too passive a manner. It would be odd for Marx to diagnose this as an error of materialism in Thesis I and Thesis III only to reproduce it in Thesis VI. A second point is that what Marx is criticizing in the Thesis VI is not the view that there is such a thing as 'human nature', but rather the view that we can understand human nature as an 'abstraction inherent in each single individual'. The early Marx – the Marx who unambiguously has a conception of human nature – has good reason to reject this claim too, for he sees human nature as partly constituted by our relationships with others.

Thesis XI contains Marx's famous remark that: 'The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it' (Marx 1975, 423). The target of this remark is the view that providing a correct interpretation of the world is sufficient for overcoming illusion. On Marx's view, the young Hegelians are exemplars of such a view, for they believe that exposing religion as a projection of the human essence is sufficient for transcending religion. Marx's reply, we have seen, is that religion will endure as long as there remains a need for the consolation it provides. Hence to rid ourselves of religion we must rid ourselves of a world that requires religion, and this requires us to change the world, not merely interpret it. However, Thesis XI should not be read as a call to abandon theory in favor of practice. Besides the fact that this is an implausible position, it is not the view of a man who devoted his life to theoretical activity. So the message of the *Theses* is not that we must focus on practice instead of theory, but the familiar, if somewhat unspecified, Marxian claim about the necessity of uniting theory and practice.

3. Theory of History

Marx and Engels considered the theory of history to be one of Marx's most important theoretical achievements. In an autobiographical note Marx described it as the 'guiding thread of his studies', and in a speech delivered at Marx's graveside Engels compared Marx's discovery of 'the law of development of human history' with Darwin's discovery of the law of nature. However, there are serious questions about how it should be understood.

To begin with, we can compare Marx's theory of history with Hegel's. The most striking feature of Hegel's approach is that he sees history as a rational and intelligible process that is moving towards a specific end or goal. For Hegel, the overarching narrative consists in the attempt of the human species to attain knowledge of itself and to create a social world that corresponds to this knowledge. In Hegel's view, the development of self-knowledge takes place within a series of discrete stages or epochs, with each one of those stages being characterized by a particular form of self-knowledge that is expressed in that society's institutions (its family, economy and state) and culture (its art, religion and philosophy). Epochal change is explained in similar terms: as human begins develop more and more adequate understandings of themselves, the social world is changed – often violently – to correspond to the particular level of self-knowledge the human species has attained. Finally, Hegel holds that he is living at the culmination of history, in the sense that human self-knowledge is close to being complete and that the modern social world – the social world that he described in the *Philosophy of Right* – though not without its problems, is one that is rationally acceptable to its members.

The relation between Marx's theory of history and Hegel's is complex, but one helpful way of thinking about it is seeing Marx as preserving the structure of Hegel's theory but endowing it with fresh content (Cohen 1978, 26). Like Hegel, Marx sees history as an intelligible process that is moving towards a distinct end or goal. And like Hegel once more, Marx considers the development of human history to occur within discrete stages or epochs. However, where Hegel sees the overarching narrative of history as the attempt of the human species to attain knowledge of itself, Marx sees it in terms of the attempt of the human species to liberate itself from material scarcity. So in Marx's account, labor is the basic activity of human history.

Moreover, while Marx agrees with Hegel that history takes place within discrete stage or epochs, in Marx's view each stage is characterized not by the level of knowledge attained by spirit but by the distribution of the means of production. Political and legal institutions, culture, and forms of consciousness must be explained in light of these facts, not vice-versa. Finally, while Marx agrees that history is moving towards a distinctive end or goal, for Marx the end of history is not the society Hegel described in the *Philosophy of Right*, with its nuclear family, capitalist economy, and constitutional monarchy, but a communist society.

3.1. The Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*

In what follows I take the Preface to the 1859 *A Critique of Political Economy* as the primary source for the exposition of Marx's views. Marx begins this Preface with a brief but revealing autobiographical statement about the development of his views, and then provides a crystalline statement of the theory of history. The choice of the Preface is controversial, however, on account of the fact that it belongs to a work that was superseded, and that was written in expectation of Prussian censorship. However, the focus is justified because it provides the clearest statement of Marx's view, and because it has also served as the basis for much of the discussion in the secondary literature, including G.A. Cohen's path-breaking *Karl Marx's Theory of History: An Interpretation and Defence*.

Central to the Preface are three concepts that require elaboration: the 'productive forces', 'relations of production', and the 'superstructure' (Marx 2000, 425–426). The 'productive forces' fall into two categories: the means of production and the labor-power of the producers. The former includes tools, machinery and raw materials, the latter the strength, technical know-how and expertise of the producers. The first claim, which Cohen calls the Development Thesis, is that the productive forces have a tendency to develop over time. This is because human beings are continually looking for more efficient ways to satisfy their needs, and because the satisfaction of basic needs leads to the generation of less basic needs that call for the development of more advanced productive forces.

The second concept is 'relations of production', or (as I shall call it here) the 'economic structure'. The economic structure is specified by relations of economic power over the productive forces, that is, relations of economic power over the means of production and human labor-power. Each economic structure – slavery, feudalism, capitalism – exhibits a different relation of economic power, with capitalism, for example, being characterized by the fact that capitalists exercise full economic power over the means of production, with workers only having full economic power over their own labor-power (which they must therefore sell in order to survive). The second claim, which Cohen calls the Primary Thesis, is that the level of the development of the productive forces explains the nature of the economic structure, in that a certain level of development of the productive forces generates a certain type of economic structure. To use one of Marx's own examples, the 'hand-mill gives you society with the feudal lord; the steam-mill, society with the industrial capitalist' (Marx 2000, 219–220). The intuitive idea is that the development of the productive forces, such as the discovery of new types of technology, will often require changes in economic relations in order to be utilized efficiently.

The third concept is the 'superstructure' and 'ideology'. It is a vexed question exactly what

should be included within these categories, but the former uncontroversially includes the major political and legal institutions and the latter the major moral, political and religious ideas that predominate at any given time. The third claim here, which Cohen calls the Second Primacy Thesis, is that the nature of the economic structure largely explains the nature of the superstructure and ideology, in the sense that a certain type of economic structure generates certain kind of legal and political institutions as well as certain forms of consciousness. So, for example, under feudalism there exists legal and political institutions and forms of consciousness that correspond to feudalism, whereas under capitalism there exist forms that correspond to capitalism, and so on.

How then, according to this account, are we to explain how one form of economic structure changes to another – for example, how feudalism came to be replaced by capitalism, and how capitalism will one day come to be replaced by communism? The basic idea is that an economic structure survives only for as long as it furthers the development of the productive forces. When an economic structure 'fetters' the development of the productive forces, by contrast, it will come to be replaced by a different economic structure that is more conducive to productive advancement. In turn, with 'the change of the economic foundations the entire immense superstructure is more or less rapidly transformed' (Marx 2000, 425).

Put this way, it is not hard to see why the Preface has become the definitive account of Marx's theory of history. However, as we shall now see, the account also prompts a number of questions and doubts.

3.2. Questions About the Materialist Theory of History

Broadly speaking, these questions fall into two categories: questions about whether the Preface represents Marx's considered view, and questions about whether the view expressed in the Preface is independently plausible.

Starting with the former, one objection to centrality afforded to the Preface by commentators such as Cohen, is that while it successfully brings together a number of Marx's characteristic claims, such as the primacy of material factors in explaining historical development, other aspects are conspicuously absent. Central among these is the notion of class and class struggle. *The Communist Manifesto* begins with the claim that the 'history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles' (Marx and Engels 2000, 246), yet class itself is not mentioned in the Preface. Recognizing this problem, Cohen admits that class struggle has a secondary role in the Preface, but argues that there is still a sense in which history is the history of class struggle. The basic idea is that epoch change is indeed brought about by class struggle, but in order to explain why class struggle occurs, and why, more importantly, class struggle brings about certain economic structures not others (that is, why class struggle under feudalism brought about capitalism rather than something else), we must beyond it to the complex dialectic of productive forces and economic structures (Cohen 1988, 14–18).

A second scholarly problem requires more elaboration, however. We have seen that the Preface expresses the view the level of the development of the productive forces explains the nature of the economic structure, just as the nature of the economic structure explains the legal and political superstructure and ideology. However, Marx says a number of things that

seem to contradict this simple line of determination. For instance, in the *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx describes capitalism as promoting the development of 'more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together' (Marx and Engels 2000, 249), and in a number of others places he suggests that legal and political institutions sustain capitalism (as we have seen in the discussion of rights in 'On the Jewish Question', for example). On the face of it, this implies a line of determination that is opposed to that given in the Preface, since it suggests that an economic structure can explain the level of the productive forces and that political and legal superstructures can reinforce economic structures.

In reply to this problem Cohen has made the brilliant move of appealing to the idea of functional explanation (Cohen 1978, 278–289). Functional explanations, which are commonly employed in evolutionary biology, have the structure that *e* occurs because it would cause *f*. So, for example, that 'birds have hollow bones because hollow bones facilitate flight'. In this case, something (birds having hollow bones) that has an effect (the facilitation of flight) is explained by the fact that it has that effect. Applied to historical materialism, Cohen's move is, in effect, to admit that economic structures promote the expansion of the productive forces, and that legal and political institutions sustain economic structures, but to claim that this is why we have the particular structure and superstructure we do. Hence there is no contradiction in insisting upon the priority of the productive forces in explaining the economic structure but also claiming that capitalism promotes the development of the forces, for capitalism obtains precisely because it develops the forces. In this way, Cohen's use of functional explanation achieves what many thought impossible: it renders Marx's theory of history internally consistent.[5]

Let us now turn to the question of whether Marx's theory of history, as found in the Preface, is plausible. Needless to say, Marx's theory has received an enormous amount of criticism, and there is no space to deal with it all here. So in what follows, I focus exclusively on the claim, which Cohen makes central to his interpretation, that history is fundamentally characterized by the development of the productive forces.

Now, one obvious doubt one might have is whether the productive forces do develop over time. Of course, it would be hard to deny that there has been dramatic development under capitalism, but one plausible line of criticism is that Marx generalized this seemingly never-ending development to all times and places. Some empirical evidence seems to support this view. For instance, it has been claimed that in the Ming and Ch'ing dynasties in China and in Poland between1500-1800 there was stagnation or even regression of the productive forces (Joshua Cohen 1982). As a result, the thesis that the productive forces develop over time is less clear-cut than it initially appears.

If these empirical counter-examples are true they not only impugn Marx's thesis that there is a tendency for the productive forces to over time; they also cast into doubt Marx's claim that an economic structure that fails to facilitate the development of the productive forces will be

5 Which is not to say, of course, that his account is universally accepted. For a critique and alternative account, see Miller 1984.

replaced by one that does. For here we seem to have counter-examples of economic structures that fetter the development of the productive forces and yet survive to tell the tale (at least for a while). This leads to the question of why the development of productive forces must lead to a change of economic structure. At bottom, Marx's idea seems to boil down to the claim that people will not acquiesce in a sub-optimal development of the productive forces when a higher level is available: people will choose to satisfy their needs in the most efficient manner above everything else. However, it may be that Marx overestimated the rationality of human beings to select the most efficient means of productive power and concurrently underestimated the extent of human attachment to the particular forms of culture and society they inhabit. Indeed, Cohen has himself admitted that Marx neglects the need for (unhyphenated) self definition, and that this neglect may well have led him to overlook the importance of non-material factors, such as religion and nationality, in historical development (Cohen 1988, 137).

4. Ethics

The relationship between Marx and ethics is often said to pose a conundrum or paradox. The central problem is easily seen. On the one hand, Marx writes with what seems to be a strong sense of moral outrage. Early and late, his writings are replete with descriptions of the hateful, degrading and exploitative conditions of work in modern capitalist societies. These descriptions imply moral judgment. Furthermore, although Marx held that communism was inevitable, he clearly also advocated communism as a better way for human beings to live. Indeed, it is hard to make sense of Marx's life as a revolutionary without attributing to him the view that capitalism is a morally flawed society and that communism represents a significant ethical advance on it.

At the same time, however, it is a striking fact that Marx does not use the kind of moral concepts that philosophers typically employ in their assessment of social and political institutions. In fact, Marx's writings abound with criticisms of these concepts and of morality more generally. To take a few representative examples: communists are said to 'not preach morality at all' (Marx and Engels 2000, 199); morality is described as just another 'bourgeois prejudice, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests' (Marx and Engels 2000, 254); and talk of 'equal right' and 'fair distribution' is described as 'obsolete verbal rubbish', 'ideological nonsense' and 'trash' (Marx 2000, 615). Thus although Marx's criticisms seem to rely on various moral judgments, we also find in his writings frequent condemnations of moral theorizing.

It is perhaps not surprisingly, then, that the topic of Marx and ethics has generated a sizable secondary literature. At the most general level, commentators are divided between those who argue that Marx's writings advance no moral claims on the one hand, and those who argue that his arguments do rely on moral judgments of some kind on the other. However, within each of these positions there remains significant scope for disagreement. Thus commentators who agree that Marx does not make moral claim disagree about why Marx rejects morality: is it because his theory of history undercuts the idea of morality as an autonomous force, because he thinks that pressing moral claims on one another is corrosive to truly human community, or because he thinks that communism will generate a level of material abundance that makes considerations of morality otiose? Similarly commentators

who agree that there is ethical dimension to Marx's writings disagreement about the nature of it. Topics ripe for disagreement here include whether Marx's critique of capitalism appeals to considerations of justice, whether Marx's moral judgments is compatible with his frequent condemnation of morality, and whether Marx's normative position should be interpreted in utilitarian, Kantian or Aristotelian terms.

In what follows I focus on two issues. The first of these concerns the vexed question of whether Marx thought capitalism was unjust. Along with the materialist conception of history, this has been the major topic of debate among analytic philosophers interested in Marx. The second is his views on the good life under communism. This has received less attention, but is of significant interest nevertheless.

4.1. Justice

Like his views on ethics more generally, Marx attitude towards justice is puzzling. On the one hand, some of Marx's criticisms of capitalism seem to imply an ideal of justice. For instance, Marx plainly holds the view that capitalism is exploitative. On the other hand, however, Marx never explicitly says that capitalism is unjust, or that communism will be more just than capitalism. In fact, in *Capital* he explicitly denies that capitalism is unjust, and describes exploitation as a 'piece of good luck to the buyer but by no means an injustice for the worker' (Marx 2000, 505). Commentators are divided about whether to take remarks like these at face-value.

Allen Wood has put forward a trenchant defense of the view that Marx did not think capitalism is unjust (Wood 1972, 1979, 2004). Wood's core claim is that Marx's approach precludes a standpoint external to a mode of production from which one can evaluate the justice of that mode of production. This is because Marx views justice as a juridical concept, and the role of juridical concepts, according to Marx's theory of history, is to reinforce the prevailing mode of production. On this interpretation, an action, social institution or principle is just when it 'corresponds' or 'harmonizes' with the mode of production, 'unjust' when it does not. Hence while the holding of slaves under capitalism can be criticized as unjust, the exploitation of workers 'is by no means an injustice', for exploitation is absolutely essential to the effective functioning of the capitalist system. In sum, then, Wood's view is that for Marx one can only judge capitalism by capitalist standards, and by those standards, capitalism is, unsurprisingly, not unjust.

Opposition to Wood's interpretation comes from many different quarters, but one particularly forceful rebuttal comes from Ziyad I. Husami (Husami 1978; see also Young 1978). Husami takes issue with Wood's view that there is only one standpoint from which one can evaluate the justice of a particular mode of production. The key point is that, according to Marx's 'sociology of morals', moral ideas have not one but two levels of determination. One of these is the prevailing mode of production, as Wood says. But a second determination – overlooked by Wood – is one's class position. On this view, each class has its own distinctive moral perspective that they bring to bear on a particular mode of production. Hence a mode of production may be viewed as just by one class but not by another. And this, Husami claims, is what happens under capitalism. From the perspective of the bourgeoisie, capitalism is a just social system. But from the perspective of the proletariat, which is Marx's

perspective too, capitalism is unjust.

A major problem for Husami, and indeed anyone wishing to defend the view that Marx thought capitalism unjust, is to explain why Marx appears to go out of his way to deny this. Responding to quotations in which Marx says that capitalism is just, Husami says we must pay attention to Marx's use of irony. Far from extolling the justice of capitalism, Marx is in fact satirizing the view of the capitalist who sees 'justice in the midst of exploitation'. This might explain why Marx sometimes describes capitalism as 'just', but it does not explain why Marx, in less satirical mood, does not condemn capitalism as unjust. If Marx's view matches that of the proletariat, why did he not make plain that he was criticizing capitalism from their perspective? Other answers may be offered here – for instance that Marx was concerned with emphasizing the difference between himself and the Utopian socialists, or that he considered arguments about justice to be no help in the revolutionary struggle. However, none of these explanations is entirely convincing.

Nevertheless, even if Husami fails to show that Marx did think that capitalism was unjust, this is not to say that Wood's view comes away unscathed from his critique. For Husami unearths a huge amount of evidence that shows that, while Marx did not explicitly describe capitalism as unjust, he did describe it as a system of 'stealing', 'robbery', 'embezzlement' and so on. The problem, in short, is how this language can be reconciled with Wood's view that Marx did not think capitalism is unjust. As G.A. Cohen puts it, 'since, as Wood will agree, Marx did not think that by the capitalist criteria the capitalist steals, and since he did think he steals, he must have meant that he steals in some appropriately non-relativist sense. And since to steal is, in general, wrongly to take what rightly belongs to another, to steal is to commit an injustice, and a system which is 'based on theft' is based on injustice' (Cohen 1983, p. 443).

Where does this leave us? On the one hand, Wood's view has the virtue of making sense of Marx's explicit remarks about justice, in particular his counter-intuitive claim that capitalism is not unjust. On the other hand, Wood's view is unable to account for Marx's recurrent use of language that strongly implies that he did think that capitalism was unjust, notwithstanding his protestations to the contrary. In light of this, some commentators have argued that the only satisfactory way to resolve the interpretive problem is to attribute to Marx a defective understanding of his own views. According to this interpretation, Marx did criticize capitalism as unjust but he did not see himself as doing do (Cohen 1983; Geras 1989). This is because Marx interpreted justice in an extremely narrow way, as a purely juridical notion that has no independence from a particular mode of production. The suggestion advanced here is that if we interpret justice in less idiosyncratic fashion, for instance as being ultimately concerned with fair terms of social cooperation, then Marx's account of capitalism can indeed be viewed as a critique of an unjust social system. Such an interpretation has the virtue of being able to square Marx's implicit moral judgments with his explicit condemnations of morality, albeit at the cost of interpreting Marx as someone who does not have a firm grip on his own views.

Rather than considering this interpretive issue in more detail, my view is that we get a better sense of Marx's distinctive perspective on questions of justice by examining some of his more constructive comments and criticisms of specific distributive proposals. The 'Critique of the

Gotha Programme' is a particularly rich text in this regard. There, Marx considers the two distributive principles that he believes will characterize the lower and higher levels of a post-capitalist society. The first principle – the one that will characterize the lower level of communism – calls for people to be rewarded in proportion to the labor that they have contributed. Call this the contributory principle. Something like this is often thought to be Marx's position, but as we shall now see, he considers it to be a naïve view – for two reasons. First, Marx argues out that the contributory principle unfairly rewards people on the basis of their innate natural endowments. The contributory principle no longer discriminates on the basis of class, but by calibrating pay to one's productive contribution, 'it tacitly recognizes unequal individual endowment and thus productive capacity as natural privileges' (Marx 2000, 615). Hence it remains too heavily influenced by morally arbitrary factors. Second, Marx argues that the contributory principle ignores the fact that people have different needs: 'one worker is married, another not; one has more children than another, and so on'. Hence equal treatment in one respect will not yield equality in another and perhaps also more relevant sense: 'with an equal performance of labor...one will in fact receive more than another, one will be richer than another' (Marx 2000, 615).

The second principle – the one that will characterize communism proper – is the slogan 'from each according to his ability to each according to his need' (Marx 2000, 615). Call this the needs principle. It is clear that Marx takes the needs principle to overcome the problems he identified with the contributory principle, but unfortunately, he does not clarify how it is to be understood. The most obvious way to interpret this is that people must contribute according to their abilities to receive according to their needs. According to this interpretation, the needs principle improves on the contributory principle because distribution is now conditional on effort (which is not arbitrary) rather than productivity, and because distribution is now sensitive to differences in individual need (leaving aside the difficult question of how 'needs' are to be interpreted). However, it is doubtful that Marx intended the needs principle to be interpreted in this fashion. After all, Marx laments the fact that the contributory principle will, as a result of its recent emergence from capitalism, necessarily be infected by bourgeois attitudes, such as the attitude that one deserves to be rewarded for superior productivity. It is questionable that the needs principle 'transcends' bourgeois attitudes, however, if it stipulates that one should work to the full of one's ability to receive anything in return. Hence it seems more plausible that Marx intended the needs principle, not as a norm to which future individuals must adhere, but as a description of what life under communism will be like (Cohen 1990). On this interpretation, future individuals work according to their abilities, not because doing so is a condition for getting something in return, but because that is what they want to do, work now being 'life's prime want'; and they receive according to their needs, not because they claim that as their due, but because the achievement of material abundance, and the transcendence of bourgeois attitudes about desert, means that people can just take what they need from the common stock of resources.

4.2. Vision of the Good Life

Regardless of whether the needs principle expresses an ideal of distributive justice, the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme' makes clear that capitalism is not the best way for human beings to live. But what is the best way? Marx wrote less on this question than one might expect, believing that a detailed account of communism is both unnecessary and impossible

(Leopold 2016). Nevertheless, it would be wrong to say that Marx said nothing on these matters. For a good deal can be inferred from his critique of capitalism, and many of his writings contain some discussion of what a good life under communism would be like. In what follows, I examine Marx's views on these matters by commenting on what I take to be his three most extensive accounts of the good life under communism.

The first of these is found in the concluding passage of the early Marx's 'Comments on James Mill', written in 1844. There Marx invites the reader to imagine that we had 'produced as human beings', which is to say, in a non-alienated fashion under communism.

> '(1) In my *production* I would have objectified the *specific character* of my *individuality* and for that reason I would have enjoyed the expression of my own individual *life* during my activity and also, in contemplating the object, I would experience an individual pleasure ...(2) In your use or enjoyment of my product I would have the *immediate* satisfaction and knowledge that in my labour I had gratified a *human* need...(3) I would have acted for you as the *mediator* between you and the species, thus I would be acknowledged by you yourself as the complement of your own being...I would thus know myself to be confirmed both in your thoughts and your love. (4) In the individual expression of my own life I would have brought about the individual expression of your life, and so in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realized* my authentic nature' (Marx 1975, 277-288).

Earlier in the text Marx bemoans the fact that under capitalism people produce only as a means to the achievement of their own ends: 'I have produced for myself and not for you, just as you have produced for yourself and not for me' (Marx 1975, 274). By contrast, communism is a society where we realize our ends *through* serving others – by helping them satisfy their needs. Thus as a producer, I enjoy the expression of life during the activity and in knowing my personality to be manifest in what I create. Under communism work is a form of self-realization. But at the same time, my self-realization serves you, and that service contributes to my own, as well as your, self-realization. Thus when you use my product, I experience the enjoyment in knowing that I had satisfied your needs. Moreover, because I have satisfied your need, you acknowledge that I have completed your essential nature. And finally, I recognize that I am acknowledged by you – 'confirmed both in your thought and your love' – and this recognition further contributes to my self-realization.

This account of the good life stresses self-realization through socially necessary labor – work that satisfies needs. Marx's position on this matter is distinctive. He not only thinks that self-realization is compatible with work being necessary; he thinks that the necessity of work is a major source of work's attraction. For it is only in necessary work that I get the 'direct enjoyment' in knowing that I had helped another satisfy their needs, and that I can be recognized by you as completing your essential nature. As we shall see, however, Marx's belief in the centrality of necessary work to self-realization was not permanent.

I find this vision of the good life quite appealing. It contains the idea that our neediness and dependence on others is not a regrettable aspect of human existence we would be better off

without, but, properly seen, a positive feature of human life. However, it is hard to see how this model could be applied to the conditions of large-scale economy. Can we find fulfillment in producing for others when we only make an intangible fraction of the final product and when the 'others' in question are strangers? Commentators are divided about this.[6]

The second description I want to discuss is the following famous passage from *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 shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; while 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, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming a hunter, fisherman, shepherd, or critic' (Marx and Engels 2000, 185).

This passage has puzzled Marx's readers, for Marx consistently emphasized that communism will be a productive and technologically-advanced society, yet the pre-dinner activities he and Engels list invoke an image that is pastoral rather than productive, and the post-dinner activity is also not one they would endorse. As a result, doubts have been raised about how far this passage reflects Marx's considered view about the good life under communism (Carver 1998, 87–119; but cf. Sayers 2011, 136–141). However, if we put the specific activities Marx and Engels list to one side, the passage is essentially consistent with Marx's other remarks on this topic. The hunting, fishing, shepherding and criticizing is surely not to be taken seriously, but there is no reason to think that the passage's underlying ideas, which I go on to explicate below, are similarly insincere.

What are those underlying ideas? Here Marx highlights at least two evils of the capitalist division of labor and two attractive features of the good life under communism. The first evil concerns not specialization *per se*, but its coercive character. The work of the proletarian is 'forced upon him'. The labor in capitalist society is 'involuntarily' divided. The contrast is to a future society in which the activities I do are ones I want to do. The second evil is specialization. Under capitalism 'each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity' – that is, there are fishermen and critics, but the fishermen don't criticize and the critics don't fish. In a communist society things are different. There, nobody has 'one sphere of activity'. Rather, each realizes him or herself in what Marx calls a 'full' or 'all-round' way though the performance of varied activities.

A common objection to this picture appeals to the idea of abundance. Economic specialization allows people to produce more than was previously possible, freeing people from need and

[6] For a skeptical view, see Elster 1989. For an interesting account of how some of these problems could be handled, see Brudney 2010.

also reducing the time they have to work. Of course, under capitalism specialization is often directed at maximizing profit, rather than liberating people from need or shortening the working-day. But under communism the division of labor could be utilized to serve a different set of priorities. Therefore, specialization should be encouraged. However, even if the division of labor does enable more efficient production, it might nevertheless be impermissible if it is achieved at the expense of individual human flourishing. If the cost of material abundance is that some people are forced to spend their lives in deadening occupations, this is not one we should accept.

This is a strong point against an intensive division of labor. However, it is not obvious that self-realization, even as it is conceived by Marx, as consisting in the full or all-round development of human powers, is incompatible with the division of labor as such. For Marx's argument arguably overlooks the extent to which complex specializations often require the exercise, development and successful integration of a wide-range of powers and capacities. For example, to be a surgeon one obviously needs to master a body of medical knowledge and develop a whole range of fine technical skills. But one also needs to develop certain personal qualities to deal with one's patients effectively and get along with one's colleagues. Thus even if one accepts Marx's own ideals, his out and out hostility to the division of labor remains somewhat questionable.

Let us now turn to the third and final vision of the good life under communism, which is from the third volume of *Capital:*

> '…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...Freedom in this field 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. Beyond it begins that development of human energy which is an end in itself, the true realm of freedom, 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 2000, 534-535).

In my view, this passage represents a significant change of views from the position Marx adopts in the 'Comments on Mill' (Kandiyali 2014). For in that earlier work Marx described the performance of necessary work as integral to the good life, whereas in the above quotation, by contrast, he describes work determined by 'necessity' as being incompatible with 'true' freedom. This is not to say that necessary work is completely lacking in freedom, for there is a form of freedom to be had in this field ('freedom in this field....'). But it is to say that necessity of labor, from being integral to self-realization, is now seen as a barrier to it. According to this reconsidered view, real freedom stars when work stops.

According to some commentators, the 'freedom and necessity' passage in the third volume of

Capital represents a welcome realism on Marx's part about what it is possible to achieve within a modern economy (Gorz 1982). While he had once claimed that work could be really free, Marx's increased awareness of industrial conditions taught him that the reduction of work was the more feasible goal. Maybe there are good arguments in support of this claim, but in the third volume of *Capital*, Marx does not provide any argument as to why socially necessary labor cannot lend itself to self-realization. He seemed to think it self-evident, lying, as he puts it, in the 'very nature of things'. But if 'true freedom' consists in the development of human powers, why can't this be done in necessary work just as well as in leisure? At bottom, Marx's position seems to rest on the fallacious inference that things that have to be done cannot simultaneously be truly free (Cohen 1988, 261). Yet it is not hard to think of counter-examples: eating is freely performed despite being necessary, and cooking for others can be self-realizing.

I have argued that Marx's vision of the good life changes in important respects throughout his writings. However, this is not to say that there Marx's vision is incoherent. There is a consistent commitment running through Marx's writings about the good life under communism. This is a commitment to an uncompromising form of ethical individualism. This individualism is present in the vision of 'truly human' production in the early Marx's 'Comments on Mill' in that text's emphasis on individual self-realization. True, the vision also emphasizes serving others, but that account is absolutely not one of forsaking one's individual interests to serve others, but of realizing one's individual interests *through* serving others – by helping them to satisfy their needs. It is also present in Marx's polemic against specialization in *The German Ideology*, for that polemic is based on the view that although specialization has greatly increased the productive power of the community, such gains cannot be tolerated if they are achieved at the expense of individual well-being. Finally, even the less optimistic account of work in the third volume of *Capital* is motivated by an individualistic concern – specifically, about labor or leisure is the realm best-suited to self-realization. Marx's vision of the good life under communism is often criticized for calling, in the words of one commentator, for the 'sacrifice of the individual to the collective and of private interests to the interests of the whole' (Churchich 1994, 165), but, in Marx's view, it is capitalism that sacrifices some for the benefit of others. His vision of the good life under communism, by contrast, is one in which 'the original and free development of individuals ceases to be a mere phrase' (Marx and Engels 2000, 207).[7]

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