Can Early Marx Ground His Critique of Capitalism?

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I. Introduction

The period between 1843 and 1845 marks an important and distinctively formative stage in Marx's career. This period begins with *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* of 1843 and ends with *The German Ideology* of 1845, signifying his early attention to German idealist philosophy (particularly Hegel and Hegelianism, such as that of Ludwig Feuerbach) and his increasing interest in the system of "private property", *i.e.* capitalism. Indeed, it was in *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* (EPM henceforward) that Marx made his first attempt at a critique of capitalism, based on alienation from our true essence, *viz.* our human species-being.

This essay will examine the structural status of Early Marx's critique. After outlining this alienation-based critique, I will establish – against Allen Wood's commentary – that Early Marx not only has an ethical theory, but that this theory provides an important grounding for his critical apparatus. This ethical theory also describes the good life: the good life for human beings is to conduct activities suited to their nature.

As he advances the substantive claim that fulfilling, collaborative labor is essential to who we are, Early Marx identifies the good life as one in which people can produce freely and meaningfully. The evil of capitalism, it follows, is that it degenerates fulfilling labor into "alienated labor," rendering the good life through work impossible.

I identify the underlying structure of Early Marx's argument as similar to that in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. They not only each give a version of non-utilitarian consequentialism, but they both base their ethical theories on appeals to their accounts of human nature. They share a normative structure that is summarized by the following valid syllogism:

> P1. The good life is to do what is human – a basic normative claim;
>
> P2. To do X is to do what is human – a metaphysical theory of human nature;
>
> C. The good life is to do X.

However, with his methodological commitment against abstract, speculative philosophizing, Marx seems to be in no position to justify either the abstract claim of P1 or the substantive claim of P2, wherein he thinks of a certain kind of labor activities as central to human nature, nor does it appear to me that he can possibly justify them. Given his inability

to reconcile his methodological approach and philosophical substance, I argue that Early Marx's appeal to human nature – the lack of exercise of which he terms "alienation" – fails as an attempt to ground his normative and ethical claims, which gestures at an explanation for his post-1845 methodological shift to immanent critique that requires no metaphysical grounding.

II. The Conception of Alienation & Critique of Capitalism

Early Marx's general critical outlook is that capitalism makes it impossible for us to engage in such activities (for example, labor) - or to engage in them in such manners (in the case of labor, a distinct kind of collaborative "social labor") - that are in harmony with the essential nature of our human species. The primary problem of capitalism is that it *alienates* us from who we truly are, and thus Marx's concept of "alienation" deserves some close scrutiny.

The German term for "alienation" – alternatively translated as "estrangement" – is *Entfremdung* or *Entäusserung*. They have the literal sense of making something "strange, foreign" or "external, of others." They carry the image of externalizing something that is supposed to be internal, to make alien/strange/foreign something that is supposed to be familiar, and to make what is supposed to be of *this* to be of *other.* Taken together, Marx's use of the term "alienation" or "estrangement" should refer to the unnatural separation of

things that naturally belong together.

Much like Hegel's and Feuerbach's use of the notion of alienation to address spirituality and religious consciousness, Early Marx focuses on a specific kind of alienation under capitalism: alienated labor. Alienated labor should be taken literally to mean the unnatural separation of the worker from her labor. In *EPM*, Marx identifies four kinds of alienation for workers: 1. Alienation from the product, as it is taken away by the capitalists once the production commences; 2. Alienation from the working process itself, because the workers' labor is transformed into something for sale (so as to earn a wage for livelihood) and thus belong to others, *i.e.* the capitalists; 3. Alienation from other workers, as workers are put into competition for employment and for higher wages against each other; 4. Alienation from their "species-beings" [*Gattungswesen*], which will be examined further, because it is the most philosophically interesting and arguably primary kind of alienation for Early Marx's critique.

Early Marx's problem with alienated labor is not that the repetitious, mechanical labor process renders the workers' subjective life unpleasurable and anguished via the nature of the work itself: "robbed of all actual life content…worthless, devoid of dignity"[1]. Such subjective states are surely terrible, but at best evidential or symptomatic of alienation. Instead, alienation in labor is an objective state, where the product of the worker is taken away, work is only done to earn a

wage (rather than being an autonomous activity), workers are turned against each other, etc. What each worker thinks or feels about such an objective state is irrelevant. A well-paid software engineer at Google is nonetheless an alienated worker; a pre-capitalist peasant suffering from his work may nonetheless be unalienated.

Only with this in mind can we approach the fourth sense of alienated labor, which seems the most interesting for our purposes. It refers to the unnatural separation of the worker from her species-being, or something akin to her "human nature". Species-being literally points to the folk idea of "what makes us human". For Marx, the species-being is not manifested statically, but only in practice/in action: a life in harmony with species-beings is a life in which we act like a human, specifically, our essential powers qua human beings are realized. In other words, for Marx we are not *just* what we are; we are what we (can) do. Somewhat anticipating the Capabilities Approach, Marx maintains that it is our powers to act that make who we are. Therefore, alienation from one's species-being means an objective inability to realize one's essential powers. Under capitalism, we as workers are thwarted from the full exercise of our essential powers.

What are our essential powers that constitute our species-being? Early Marx suggests that our ability to engage in labor is among them. The point of labor for Marx is objectification. Despite its negative connotation in popular usage,

objectification is indispensable for Marx. As *EPM* explains, "the product of labor is labor which has been congealed in an object, which has become material; it is [the] *objectification* of labor"[2]. For Marx, labor is the conscious transformation of the world; we can only act upon the material world by objectifying our productive power, *viz*. by turning that power into something tangible[3], material, and real. By engaging in labor, one not only objectifies one's labor into a concrete product, but also affirms one's human species-being by exercising one's essential powers. This Marxian theme seems to echo Aristotle's idea that production is the objectification of the self, as the activation of the essence, such that "his product manifest[s] in reality"[4]. We affirm our individuality as well as our humanity through our conscious productive activity and confirm them with the objectively existing products of labor, which Marx describes as "so many mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature"[5]. Our productive power thus belongs naturally to our species-being.

Labor under capitalism is alienated precisely because this natural linkage ("belonging-together") is cut off. An activity of labor is inhuman if it lacks *control* where one ought to have; a human activity, by contrast, is an autonomous "self-activity". Marx seems to suggest that in order for the work to be unalienated, workers *ought* to have freedom in choosing: 1) on whether to labor at all and 2) on how and what to labor, as part of the transformation of the world. With respect to capitalism's claim that it has brought about

unprecedented emancipation, wage-workers have become categorically freer than previously-existing serfs or slaves, but it introduces distinctly new forms of severe unfreedom that may be avoidable under a different social arrangement. Under capitalism, workers suffer from the four aspects of alienated labor at once, as they lose their products, their work, their comradery, and their human selves as they work. Central to this picture is that workers' work, as it is under capitalism, is not truly autonomous self-activity, for they lack control where they ought to have it.

Workers under alienated labor do appear to voluntarily choose to work as they do, but that is just a mere appearance. In reality, there is no alternative to engaging in the capitalist mode of production. Since the means of production are concentrated at the hands of capitalists, the workers cannot support their own lives without constantly selling themselves, via their labor, as commodities. To refuse such a transaction is to deny oneself of the day's subsistence and thus deny oneself of life. Compelled by the threat of starvation, workers must instead spend all their days working for mere subsistence (a low level guaranteed by inter-workers alienation, *viz*. competition amongst workers). As Engels summarizes in 1847, "The slave is sold once and for all; the proletarian must sell himself daily and hourly."[6] While workers under capitalism are objectively and categorically freer than slaves, they are still everywhere unfree.

Not only do alienated workers lack the freedom to choose whether to work or not, but they have no autonomy in deciding what and how they would like to produce. This is particularly damning for Marx, who not only names autonomous production as a central aspect of our human species-being, but also emphasizes that the degree of productive autonomy is closely linked with the human (as opposed to animalistic) form of being. Marx famously asserts in the 1860s – although Early Marx would more than likely concur – that, "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality"[7]. Namely, Marx seems to hold that there is a characteristically, even "exclusively" (*ibid.*), human way of labor. All animals produce for their own subsistence, but it is human to have a conscious plan in the imagination and willingly realizes it into actuality; this corresponds nicely with our previous definition of unalienated labor as the conscious transformation of the world. Unfortunately, alienated labor under capitalism is characteristically un-human, because both what to work and how to work are imposed on the workers, leaving them with no room for autonomous action. One major cause for this unfreedom is the ever-present division of labor under capitalism. Marx writes in 1845 that "As long … as activity is divided not freely but naturally, the human being's own deed becomes an alien might standing over against him, subjugating him instead of being dominated by him."[8] By this Marx alludes to Adam Smith, who argues that division of labor arises naturally from each indi-

vidual's "comparative advantages". Under such a systematic division of labor, a worker cannot be said to have control over what and how to work. Instead, the worker is subjugated, dictated, and instrumentalized by an external will to achieve goals (*e.g.*, general efficiency) outside of the worker. After all, workers lack control over the social conditions that determine how labor is divided. They objectify their labor *not* out of their own conscious will, as it naturally should; instead, their labor is so alienated that it thwarts their self-actualization as individual human beings.

The problem of human alienation, in summary, is that one's life is not lived in a human fashion, insofar as one lacks control over one's life-activities. Rather than autonomous self-activities, a worker experiences his productive labor as *not* "his own activity"[9]; rather than confirming one's individuality and humanity and thus helping to realize oneself, such activities feel like a *sacrifice*[10] that takes it out from the worker. Thus, an alienated worker paradoxically "feels at home when he is not working, and when he is working, he does not feel at home."[11] The alienated worker finds his humanity in animalistic activities, such as "eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in dressing-up, etc."[12], while feeling a loss of himself when engaging in the otherwise humanity-actualizing labor. In general, one is alienated when one is unable to fully and freely[13] exercise one's essential powers through autonomous self-activities and confirm one's human nature. This difficulty is histori-

cal[14] and most prominent amongst workers under capitalism.

III. Does Early Marx Have an Ethical Theory?

Early Marx critiques capitalism on the grounds that it causes alienation for human beings (especially among workers) and prevents them from fully actualizing their humanity. This train of thought appears to be based on two intertwined philosophical projects: a normative-ethical theory of the good life and a metaphysical one of human nature. He seems to be claiming that capitalism is *bad* because it fails to do what is *good* as a social arrangement, that is, to promote the good life. Therefore, he seems to presuppose a theory of the good life. Meanwhile, he seems to claim that to live the good life is to actualize our essential (humanity-defining/confirming) powers and to align ourselves with who we truly are, thus requiring a theory of human nature.

Whether this ethical-metaphysical complex exists for Early Marx has been controversial amongst his commentators. Allen Wood, for example, argues that Marx – young and mature – never thinks of capitalism as unjust or unethical. Along with that thought, it would be quite odd to state that Early Marx critiques capitalism from an ethical theory. Yet I think this result stems from either a misreading of Wood's position or a misunderstanding of Marx's position on Wood's part. It is perfectly possible to reconcile Wood's insight that Marx's critique is never based on justice or morality with the fact that the critique is based on a certain normative ethical

theory.

In Chapter Nine of his book, *Karl Marx*, Wood claims that "Marx bases his critique of capitalism on the claim that it frustrates many important nonmoral goods: self-actualization, security, physical health, comfort, community, freedom", rather than basing in on moral good: "virtue, right, justice, the fulfillment of duty, and the possession of morally meritorious qualities of character."[15] Marx's allegedly "non-moral" complaint about capitalism, as G.A. Cohen summarizes Wood's view, consists of the fact that "it cripples human creativity and it fosters inhumane social relations."[16] By that, I think Wood has captured something important about Marx, who believes that it is meaningless to say that capitalism is unjust or unethical, because the specific formulations of *justice* and *ethics* are contingent upon the dominant form of society. This "meaninglessness" may have two senses: 1) Theories of value – justice and ethics included – are by nature "superstructures" that justify the given social order from which and ensure the survival and stability of the structure of the "economic foundation". Our sense of justice and ethics are nothing like transhistorical natural law, but part of the self- perpetuating apparatus of capitalism that is unlikely to judge it as unjust or unethical. 2) It is possible to avoid this catch by evaluating capitalism from a different notion of justice and ethics; however, to impose certain values from outside of capitalism is jarring for Marx[17]. To say something is unjust seems to presuppose

that it violates some juridical rights, given the etymological link between "justice", *iustus* in Latin, and the law. As Wood correctly notes, this kind of right-based juridicism is not found in Marx. In his late career, Marx makes it crystal clear that his critique of capitalism has nothing to do with the "equal right" to products or "fair distribution" of wealth[18]. The idea of justice as well as the institution of law are, according to Marx, historically contingent *superstructures*, in essence "only the juridical and ideological devices by which a given mode of production enforces its social relations"[19]. The workers' alienation from their product is wrong, not because doing so is *unjust* insofar as their "property right" is violated, but because they are cut off from a natural linkage to their products, which, as above, are "mirrors in which we saw reflected our essential nature"[20] and thus confirm our human creative ingenuity. Taken together, Wood gets it right that Marx makes no criticism of capitalism based on justice. Instead, capitalism is accused as unnatural, dehumanizing, subject to immanent contradictions, etc.

However, it would be going too far to claim that Marx's critique of capitalism is amoral because it is morally irrelevant, in the sense that he needs no ethical theory. To say so confounds two senses in which the word "moral" can be used: On the one hand, morality can refer to the commonly accepted system of values specific to a given society; for example, we can say "it is not moral to kill" or "it is moral to work for the most money and then donate it". On the other hand, mo-

rality in a "meta" sense can refer to the sphere of values as such. Any "good-bad/evil" claim and any normative claim is inherently moral, in the sense of being morally relevant. If Marx is truly as morally irrelevant as this implies, he would not be able to critique capitalism, for he is not allowed to say what is wrong – which is by itself a moral term – with it. The very idea of a nonmoral critique is a contradiction in terms. Conversely, the very existence of Marx's critique of capitalism guarantees that it is a moral critique. The very problem that Wood correctly identifies as central to Early Marx's critique of capitalism, namely, that "it cripples human creativity" and fosters inhumane social relations and alienates them from the human species whom they truly are, is not moralizing, but by itself constitutes a moral charge against capitalism as long as it says something is *wrong* about it. With that in mind, the very fact that Marx makes a *critique* of capitalism -- as promoting the bad, alienating life is not only consistent with, but indeed presupposing a moral theory for the good life. There is nothing wrong – but everything essential – for Marx to make claims of normative ethics.

IV. Does Early Marx's Ethical Theory Have a Metaphysical Grounding?

As discussed above, Marx's ethical theory of the good life invokes the notion of alienation, that is, the inability to fully actualize our essential powers; this necessitates a notion of human nature, or what it is that defines us as humans. This section considers Early Marx's conception of human nature

as a metaphysical theory.

Early Marx's notion of human species-beings is somewhat fragmentary. Rather than systemizing, I summarize at least the following as its substance: Firstly, Human beings are "a tool-making animal" (per Benjamin Franklin's "definition" or, in truth, description) and productive beings. Unlike animals, humans labor beyond necessity so as to actualize their creative ingenuity, which is further evidenced by the way in which they work (i.e. conscious transformation of the world, as discussed above); Secondly, they are social beings, living and understanding themselves vis-a-vis each other, thus having a consciousness of their species as humans; Thirdly, unlike other animals, human beings are conscious of these two facts and therefore of their own species-being. Afforded by our natural propensity to work and our species-consciousness, human beings by nature cooperate and engage in social labor: even "simple co-operation" has had such "colossal effects" in history, as evidenced by "the palaces and temples, the pyramids"[21].

This account of the human species-beings may be problematic in its metaphysical status. Is "species-conscious, socially productive animal" an exhaustive theory of human nature? Is it just part of the definition of our species? Is it just a description – if so, is it timeless and universal, or does it just describe human beings in a given time and place? Some commentators have found Early Marx's theory of human na-

ture to be of a dubious character. Brian Leiter, for example, comments that "It is certainly no part of serious biology, either then or since, and it is not clear it does any explanatory work in making sense of historical transformation."[22] I will argue against the second half of his comment later by highlighting the explanatory function – grounding the ethical theory of the good life – of Marx's theory of human nature. Yet I should concur with the former objection that Marx's characterization of species-being, focused on free production, is not a biological observation. Even when anthropologists have corroborated with empirical evidence that labor is found universally in all human societies, it at best shows that labor is a necessary condition for a properly human life; this is hardly a surprising observation. However, Marx's emphasis seems to be that only free, fulfilling work – not necessary work – is part of our species-being. Thus he claims that, "the shortening of the working-day is [the] basic prerequisite … [of] the realm of freedom."[23] Also, Marx seems to place fulfilling, collaborative work in a central place in the definition of the human species. Neither claim seems to fall in the scope of investigation for biology and anthropology.

The most defensible response appears to be that Marx focuses on production as the central aspect of human nature because of his materialism. The chief methodological movement for the early Marx is to reject "speculative philosophy", that is, thinking about the human sciences in abstract, without reference to historical practice; in 1843, Marx laments that this

has been the standard practice in Western philosophy since its inception[24]. With this in mind, Marx develops his theory of human nature with a special metaphysical status. His notion of species-being does sketch the essence of human beings, but it is not an essentialist account of some unchanging human nature. That means Marx rejects the idea that every human individual inherently has an abstract, universal, or *a priori* human nature, most famously proclaimed by his Thesis VI on Feuerbach: there is no human essence as "abstraction inherent in each single individual" but "the ensemble of the social relations"[25]. To think that the same human essence exists before each human individual, for Early Marx, is akin to thinking that God exists before humans, a "religious alienation" that Feuerbach has gone a long way to refute. Instead, both the conception of human nature and religious deity are projections of our self-consciousness and self-understanding. By that Marx overturns the tradition of speculative "armchair philosophy" postulating certain things as human nature in a metaphysical and *a priori* way, and maintains that human nature is only to be discovered – epistemologically[26] and metaphysically – from historical human practice in an empirical, *a posteriori*, and even inductive fashion.

Marx's materialist theory of human nature therefore does not prescribe, but *describes* who we are. His substantive claim of the human species-being is thus a claim of *natural history*, that is, scrutinizing the life conditions and habits of human beings as a natural kind, as an animal. Following the tradition

set forth by Aristotle's research in zoology[27], Marx seems to imply that the single most important activity for any animal is the subsistence of itself; every animal works in some way to sustain its own life. Therefore, the basic nature of human beings – qua animals – must have to do with *how we feed ourselves* and meet our other basic needs. This gives rise to a materialist approach to conceptualizing human nature, such that the way in which we produce is central to any formulation of who we are. Thus, for Marx, the concept of human nature can only make sense in empirical-historical practice, rather than in speculative consciousness, as would be found in anthropological observations, and only in the collective "genus" (human species as productive beings), rather than in each individual. We can say that Marx attributes a central place of production to human nature, not from logico-metaphysical deductions, but precisely in an anti-philosophical, *a posteriori* and perhaps anthropological movement. It is a discovery from empirical history, rather than a postulation of armchair speculation; Early Marx thus displays an inchoate formulation of the materialist conception of history.

However, this natural-historical or anthropological account of human nature does not suffice in itself for Marx, but instead points to an ongoing difficulty in Marx's corpus: Marx seems to view only free, creative labor as truly fulfilling and truly human. However, it is unfree, subsistence work that fundamentally supports humans as an animal; it is also the prevailing majority kind of labor found in the history of hu-

man labor. For Early Marx, the incipient historical materialism appears to explain why he holds that only the uniquely human kind of labor – rather than animalistic subsistence labor (done only when there is an imminent need; carried out without a plan in mind, as conscious transformation of the world) – is essential to human labor: after all, if each animal has a unique way in which it produces, such a way would be essential to its species-being. However, it would be puzzling if the human kind of labor is the exclusion of the primary and original kind of labor, that is, that which meets basic animalistic needs. For Marx, only the secondary and in fact rarer kind of labor confirm human beings' nature as productive beings. Reversely, the majority kind of work – necessary, subsistence labor – is "ruled by … the blind forces of Nature"[28] and hence unfree. As such, necessary labor appears to Marx as largely akin to alienated labor; not only is it unable to confirm our species-being, but it is likely to undermine human flourishing. Whereas Marx considers production as the essential "human function"[29], he seems to think that only after producing what we need is production free and truly human, rendering subsistence labor – "the realm of necessity and mundane considerations"[30] – in truth animal, dehumanizing functions. Marx, throughout his entire career, seems never able to resolve this paradox.

V. Non-Utilitarian Consequentialism: Marx & Aristotle

The rest of this essay considers the structure of the norma-

tive ethical claim made by Early Marx, now that it is shown that he can – and does – have such a claim. It seems that Marx *grounds* his ethical theory of the good life on his theory of human nature. I shall explain it in reference to a parallel project from Aristotle. Aristotle and Marx are unalike on a level of specific moral content, yet quite alike on the level of a normative framework.

Both Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and Early Marx seem to think of a fulfilling human life as consisting in activities suited to the development and exercise of our essentially human capacities, which in turn make up our nature. They surely disagree greatly on what a fulfilling human life exactly looks like and what our essential capacities encompass – Marx is likely to find Aristotle's sanctification of the contemplative life distasteful. Yet they both see fulfilled human life as the highest ethical goal; if we take happiness in the sense of εὐδαιμονία (*eudaimonia*) as flourishing, we can claim that Early Marx wants us to be "happy", without a subjectivist reading of him. Marx's concept of alienation, as a state of objective unfulfillment wherein such capacities are frustrated, is directly comparable to Aristotle's concept of bad life, which is set up in terms of the good life. Aristotle's good life, therefore, resembles Marx's concept of unalienated life.

Aristotle and Early Marx are also alike in their way of justifying such a life as the good life. To put it bluntly, they both

understand the good life as one in which we act and actualize ourselves as human beings, because we should want to distinguish ourselves from animals. This may sound like a version of "naive humanism". For Aristotle, we should act in accord with our exclusive essence – that is, our rational soul guided by virtue[31]. Marx's species-being is also a concept concerning what makes us unique among animals, not by reason, of course, but by unalienated, fulfilling labor – through conscious objectification of the world and of the self. This vision fits nicely into Aristotelian teleology: the labor process is clearly about bringing the envisioned telos – a transformed world and an actualized self – into reality. Marx's dual telos ensures that the end of the activity (i.e., the product) is harmonized with the act of the activity (i.e., a worker engaging in production).

Following this train of thought, Richard Miller proposes that Marx and Aristotle are alike not only in rejecting Kantian juridicism – based on discourses of *rights* – and utilitarianism of Bentham and Mill, but also in giving two rare examples of non-utilitarian consequentialism[32]. Namely, they both envision the good life as consisting in the exercise of capacities suited to human nature – contemplation for Aristotle, unalienated labor for Marx, as activity in accordance with human excellence (although Aristotle's comment in NE that the contemplative life is *godly* does complicate the picture). They disagree with Kant on normative ethics: they insist value judgments over social arrangements and actions be made

on their consequences, rather than their "right" or "lawfulness" by themselves. They disagree with Bentham on the ultimate human good. Rather than aiming at promoting subjective happiness (pleasure, a *sense* of meaningfulness, etc.), they strive for what may be called objective happiness, that is, flourishing in an essentially human way[33]. Subsequently, both Marx and Aristotle "evaluate social institutions based on the consequences they have for promoting the good life"[34]. The central problem that Early Marx has with capitalism, after all, is that it causes alienation, thereby rendering people unable to exercise essential powers, actualize species-being, and lead good lives.

VI. Can Early Marx Justify His Normative Theory?

Early Marx lacks the ability to critique capitalism from his conception of the good life, *not* because he cannot appeal to a metaphysical communistic standpoint – namely, "can't have the beliefs or the consciousness of the agents in such a society, [or] that there is a metaphysical bar to doing so"[35]. Instead, the problem is the lack of justification: there is no good reason to accept Early Marx's critique of criticism without superimposing certain ethical commitments as given – a move that is inherently unjustifiable. Early Marx has a normative theory that is structurally similar to that in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. They each ground their ethical theory in a theory of human nature. Namely, they both tacitly employ a valid syllogism:

P1. The good life is to do what is human;

P2. To do X is to do what is human;

C. The good life is to do X.

Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* works toward the conclusion that the best human life is contemplative life from the general argument that contemplation is the kind of activity most in line with what is human, which further presupposes that it is good to do the kind of activity proper to what is human. Aristotle states this explicitly, in what some commentators call the "function argument": Aristotle asks for the function [*ergon*] of the human being in order to find out what kind of life they should lead. By identifying that function as "a life of action of [the part of] the soul that has reason"[36] in accordance with virtue[37]. Aristotle bridges the is-ought gap and is able to ground contemplative life as the good life, insofar as it is the most *human* kind of life.

Contrasted with Aristotle, Early Marx's similar project is of dubious character. Going back to the syllogism, for Marx it should be specified as P1. The good life is to do what is human; P2. To engage in fulfilling social labor is to do what is human; C. The good life is to engage in fulfilling social labor. Taking together bits of thoughts developed earlier in the essay, neither P1 and P2 seems possible to be sufficiently grounded for Early Marx, rendering the conclusion – Early

Marx's normative theory – impossible to justify.

Firstly, that the good life is to do what is human roughly resolves to the claim that it is good to do what is human. Marx has implicitly invoked this idea throughout his career, but nowhere other than for Early Marx has this idea occupied an essential locus. Unfortunately, Marx leaves the following questions unanswered: Why is it better to be like a human than just an animal? More generally, why is it good to act according to what we truly are and strive to realize ourselves in the first place? Aristotle can dodge this difficulty in bridging "is" and "ought" by postulating it as a metaphysical fact that each thing – human beings included – has a function toward which it should strive. He is able to resort the claim (A) that our function – what sets us apart from animals – is good for humans because of the claim (B), that the function of anything – what sets that thing apart from everything else – is good for that thing. However, this is not an option for Early Marx; he is not in a position to use the claim (B) to justify the claim (A), because the claim (B) is way too metaphysical for his methodological commitment against speculative abstract thinking about humans. However, it is not clear to me that any permissible alternative could justify the claim (A). Since Early Marx's entire critique implicitly hangs upon the idea that it is good to do what is human, his entire normative project becomes dubitable.

Secondly, the idea that humanly activities in fulfilling, con-

scious (planned) social labor is no less curious than the first premise. As we have hinted in previous sections, it is unclear how Marx could justify the idea that only free and creative labor corresponds to the truly human way of life, while anthropological observations indicate that subsistence labor – of which Marx not only thinks lowly, but uses a reference point to critiquing unalienated labor – is the primary and predominant kind. Aside from that, it is also unclear how Early Marx justifies – or can possibly justify – the claim that a certain kind of productive work is the complete essence of human nature – not just an aspect or a prerequisite of it. Marx does not seek to vindicate that claim philosophically because he thinks of it as a natural-historical claim on the empirical basis of historical human practice, rather than armchair speculation into a certain unchanging essence of our species. However, the claim does not seem to withstand philosophical scrutiny: if "engaging in fulfilling, conscious social labor" captures the essence of human nature, it can be said to define (rather than simply describe) the human species. Namely, any animal that engages in fulfilling, conscious social labor would be identifiable as human beings. Such a thought is weird, because it is not difficult to imagine a non-human animal engaging not only labor, but also that specific kind of labor. Even though Marx claims that the human way of production, in the architect-bee example, is "stamp[ed] as exclusively human"[38], that way of labor has no built-in marks of humanity when examined alone. Defenders of Marx are certainly inclined to dismiss this entire thinking

as exemplary of the kind of speculative metaphysics of human nature with which Marx avows to do away. However, a query lingers on: To what degree does Marx's theory based on creative labor grasp the very essence of human nature, rather than just giving a description of an important aspect thereof? With what can he justify this essential status? Without consulting certain metaphysical claims as Aristotle does, Early Marx seems to be left with no resource to sufficiently address these questions, which are nonetheless foundation to his entire normative theory.

In summary, Early Marx's critique of capitalism is inherently an ethical critique, on grounds that it engenders alienation of people (particularly workers) from their true human nature. This critique is inversely based on an ethical theory, best described as non-utilitarian consequentialism (which finds a parallel in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*), by which Marx assesses social conditions by the effects they have on promoting the good life. Capitalism is bad by that standard, because the alienation it causes is detrimental to the good life. Early Marx further resembles Aristotle in that they both hold that, normatively, the good life of human beings is to conduct humanly activities. However, unlike Aristotle, Early Marx has insufficient resources to justify the normative structure underlying his ethical claim. Aristotle proposes as a metaphysical claim that the good life is about acting in accordance with the human functions. However, given his important methodological attitude that rejects abstract

thinking about human nature in an *a priori* fashion, Marx is unable to justify that same claim. While Aristotle identifies contemplation as the most human activity, Marx identifies fulfilling, cooperative productive activities. Unlike Aristotle, however, Marx seems to be in no position to sufficiently justify that choice, either. These difficulties combined, Early Marx's entire normative theory is exposed as barely grounded. The weakly-based status suggests why Early Marx's alienation-based critique of capitalism would fade out of fashion: it is not so much refuted, as never having been fully vindicated. As Marx's thought develops, alienation retreats from a central explanatory role of the evils under capitalism to a diagnostic one and from the hallmark evil of capitalism to just one of its immanent contradictions. Instead of some cleavage in the style of Althusser's "epistemological break", the insufficiency in early Marx's moral philosophy gives an indication that explains the mature Marx's turn to political economy and scientific socialism.

Notes

1. MEW 3:67, via Allen Wood, Karl Marx, 9.
2. MER, EPM, 61.
3. It is noteworthy that although the idea of objectification evokes material objects as its products, it has no real difficulty in encompassing mental/intellectual fruits of labor as real products.
4. NE, IX. 7.
5. MER, "Comments on James Mill", 228.
6. Engels, "The Principles of Communism".

7. Capital, vol. I, Ch. 7.
8. German Ideology, via Allen Wood, Karl Marx, 50.
9. EPM, "Estranged Labor".
10. Adam Smith, in his Wealth of Nations, maintains work must be a sacrifice for those who do it.
11. Ibid.
12. EPM, "Estranged Labor".
13. Not just voluntarily, as in a merely formal sense of freedom.
14. Alienation is a historical problem, largely specific to capitalism. For alienation points to the gap between human essential powers and their actual (lack of) exercise; since our productive powers vary greatly throughout history and across societies, alienation rarely occurs in pre-capitalist societies. It is by the greatly expanded productivity under capitalism that alienation comes to rise and it is, in Marx's vision for communism, through the greatly expanded productivity that drives out the realm of necessities that alienation is abolished and thus enter a realm of freedom (c.f. Capital, vol.3, Chapter 48).
15. Wood 2004, 129.
16. Cohen 1983, 442.
17. Some may suggest we evaluate capitalism by the ethical standards of communism. However, doing so gets Marx wrong in an upside-down fashion: for Marx, communism is not a state of affairs, but a reversal movement (or the synthetical resolution for the contradictions) of capitalism. Therefore, it is not just epistemologically but ontologically impossible to critique capitalism by communism.
18. Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Program".
19. Wood 2004, 128.
20. MER, "Comments on James Mill", 228.

21. Capital, vol. 1, Ch. 13.
22. Leiter 2018, 24, footnote.
23. Capital, vol. 3, Ch. 48.
24. For example, in "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", Marx comments that whereas Hegelians think of Hegelianism as the highest form of Western Philosophy, it is in truth the worst symptom of abstract, a priori thinking of the same tradition.
25. "Theses on Feuerbach", Thesis VI.
26. This, I should add, is uniquely consistent with Early Marx's central rejection of the idea that philosophers have certain privileged standpoints by which they "know better". They are unlikely to know human nature from practice better than, say, historians and anthropologists.
27. Aristotle, History of Animals.
28. Marx, Capital, Vol. 3, Ch. 48.
29. EPM, "Estranged Labor"
30. Capital, vol. 3, Ch. 48.
31. NE, I.2.1094a.
32. Miller 1981.
33. They also differ from typical consequentialists in that they do not look at the end of an action alone; rather, they both foreground the action in process, alongside the ending results: Aristotle stresses that a good action must showcase virtuous character, while Marx pushes for the harmonization of ends and means – product-alienation and species-alienation are equal features of alienated labor.
34. Miller 1981.
35. Brudney 2001, 364.
36. NE, 1094a.
37. NE, 1097b22–1098a20.

38. Capital, vol. I, Ch. 7.

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