

Marxism and Aristotelian Ethics

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This article surveys the interpretations of the ethical foundations of Karl Marx's thought. These interpretations focus on the early ideas of Marx and analyze them in the context of various traditions of moral philosophy. Aristotelian ethics is often proposed as the best model to understand the ethical foundations of Marx's work. This article also points to the significance of Alasdair MacIntyre's works in moral philosophy for the Aristotelian interpretation of Marx's ethics.

Keywords: alienation, ethics, human flourishing, Aristotle, Karl Marx

INTRODUCTION

James Daly observed that the figure of Marx that emerged after the fall of Berlin Wall is very different from the one that supposedly built it (Daly 1996: iv). More and more attention is given to the early works of Marx, especially his *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* of 1844 and the theory of alienation. This rereading of Marx attempts to dissociate his ideas from the big part of the Marxist tradition, especially its more simplistic materialist and determinist versions. In other words, there is a growing tendency to re-examine the ideas of Marx against various distortions and misinterpretations.

One of the most intriguing parts of this turn is the attempt to read Marx as a moral philosopher. It aims to reconstruct ethical presuppositions that are implicit in Marx's thought and to read them in the context of various traditions of moral philosophy. These readings also aim to overcome the somewhat ambiguous attitude of Marx himself towards moral philosophy. Marx avoided using moral concepts, a tendency that deeply distressed Richard N. Hunt, otherwise a very sympathetic reader of Marx, who accused Marx for "moral constipation, chronic difficulty in expressing a positive moral conviction" (Hunt 1984: 179–180). Marx was also highly critical of some moral philosophers, for example, blaming Kant for being the "whitewashing spokesman" of German bourgeoisie (Marx 1998: 210). Nevertheless, the interpretations discussed in this paper argue that Marx's own critique of capitalism is founded on an ethical foundation that needs to be reconstructed.

One curious detail about these philosophical attempts must be emphasised. They became influential at the time of the defeat of Marxism (both theoretical and political). This background is not accidental. As Marxism in its classical form became more and more evidently outdated and inadequate, the validity of Marx's thought had to be based on something different than its "scientific" foundation. The attractive way to save Marx's relevance was found in the interpretation that downplayed Marx's scientific or "prophetic" elements and reconstructed the ethical

foundations of Marx's thought. This opened a way to see Marx's ideas in dialogue with various moral philosophies.

In this paper I will discuss some of the most important contributions to this rereading. I will focus on Marx's notion of alienation and its interpretations. Many scholars find the close relation between the moral presuppositions of Marx's critique of capitalism and Aristotelian ethics. Terry Eagleton summed up this turn to Aristotle in Marxist scholarship: "Marx himself was a true moralist in the tradition of Aristotle, though he did not always know that he was" (Eagleton 2010: 159).

PHILOSOPHICAL ANTHROPOLOGY: GATTUNGSWESEN

The attempt to reconstruct Marx's ethical thought requires the rejection of the dualism between the "young Marx" or the "philosophical Marx" versus the "scientific Marx". For example, Louis Althusser drew the sharp line between the early Marx and the Marx of *Capital* arguing that there was an "epistemological break" in the development of Marx's thinking, a break that made the early works irrelevant to the interpretation of *Capital* (Althusser 1996, Althusser, Balibar 2009). Althusser attacked Marxist humanism and the attempts to base Marx's thought in some philosophical account of human nature. Thus Althusser made a double move: he claimed that the philosophical and ethical inquiries of the early Marx were irrelevant to understand Marx's mature position and that Marx himself had decisively broken away from philosophical and ethical speculation.

We have good grounds to accept the controversy between the young and the late Marx as decisively ended. The growing literature on Marx's ethical and philosophical foundations provides strong arguments against the dualistic reading and stresses the importance of his early works. Some of the major contributions must be mentioned. Norman Geras rejected what he called as the "rather obstinate old legend" that Marx himself did not believe in essential human nature and that Marxism as a system is not compatible with such philosophical views (Geras 1983). Scott Meikle reconstructed Marx's Aristotelian essentialism of substances (Meikle 1985). István Mészáros (2005) provided the most comprehensive study of Marx's theory of alienation arguing that this theory informs the whole Marx's theoretical enterprise. Marx's philosophical account of alienation is not something he left behind as he moved to the economic analysis of capitalism. Mészáros reconstructed conclusively the continuity of this theory from the early works, through *Grundrisse* to *Capital*. Thus the claim of conceptual break is unfounded. These researches, among others, provide strong grounds to take Marx's philosophical ideas of human nature and alienation as the normative background to all his later research.

The central question in Marx's early *Manuscripts* is the nature of human flourishing and its relation to the capitalist mode of production. Marx's analysis of alienation and capitalism is based on a conception of human nature, or species-being (*Gattungswesen*). When Marx is talking about species-being, he is raising a similar question that Aristotle raised when he asked what constitutes specifically human *ergon*. Aristotle answered it by pointing to our powers of reason. In the case of Marx, human species-being is understood through the category of "production". Marx's concept of production is a very broad category encompassing all human activities: "Religion, family, state, law, morality, science, art, etc. are only *particular* modes of production, and fall under its general law" (Marx 1992b: 349). Production is not an economic, but anthropologic category (Fromm 2004: 32).

The specific human form production manifests when it is free from direct need, when we produce for the sake of production itself, as an affirmation of our human capabilities and

powers: “free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man” (Marx 1992b: 328). Human beings are not only rational (conscious) but also social beings (or *zoon politikon*, to use Aristotle’s expression): “activity and consumption that express and confirm themselves directly in *real association* with other men, occur whenever that *direct* expression of sociality springs from the essential nature of the content” (ibid: 350). Marx is talking about human beings who create their own world through free, cooperative activity that expresses our powers and provides enjoyment.

Marx argues that through such species-activity we not only form the environment to meet our needs, but we develop and change ourselves, with the enrichment of the outside world, we enrich our own nature: “The *cultivation* of the five senses is a work of all previous history” (ibid: 353). Eagleton summarized the Marxian idea of freedom in the following: “And we are at our most human when we are free to realize these [human] powers as an end in itself, rather than for purely utilitarian purpose” (Eagleton 2011: 82).

This conception of human nature provided a starting point for the critique of political economy. Such starting point was intended to overcome the reductionist nature of economic categories. Marx is dissatisfied with the economists of his time for their inability to look at the human being as a whole. They see a person only as an economic category: as labour force in the market relations. One of the aspects of alienation is this reductionism that compartmentalizes the understanding of a human being: “It is inherent in the very nature of estrangement that each sphere imposes upon me a different and contrary standard: one standard for morality, one for political economy, and so on” (Marx 1998b: 362). Each of these spheres looks at the human being only from their own point of view and fails to acknowledge human existence in all its aspects.

The category of *Gattungswesen* allows Marx to enrich such economic categories as labour or capital by grounding them in the philosophical understanding of human flourishing. Eugene Kamenka summarized: “The fundamental categories of political economy, Marx insists, are not labour, capital, profits, rents, land. The fundamental category is man, man and his human activities” (Kamenka 1972: 71). This reveals the scope and ambition of Marx’s theoretical enterprise. It also reveals how ungrounded the popular images of Marx are as an economic reductionist. Such reductionism was the object of Marx’s critique.

The notion of alienation points to the fact that production loses its nature of free, cooperative activity. For Marx, the primary example was the life of the workers under the conditions of the mid-19th century capitalism. This is indeed a very dark example of the loss of human freedom and dignity. Nevertheless, we should not focus too much on this example to understand the phenomenon of alienation. Questions that Marx raises are the following: what are the ends of human activities? Under what conditions are these activities performed? Marx radically criticised the existing labour conditions because the worker “does not confirm himself in his work, but denies himself, feels miserable and not happy, does not develop free mental and physical energy, but mortifies his flesh and ruins his mind” (ibid: 326). Thus Marx is concerned with the possibilities for human self-realization.

Marx reveals how this estrangement is manifested by the reduction of the whole world of human individuality and needs to the dictates of profit, that is, money. “The need for money is <...> the real need created by the modern economic system, and the only need it creates. The *quantity* of money becomes more and more its sole *important* property. Just as it reduces everything to its own form of abstraction, so it reduces itself in the course of its own movement to something *quantitative*. *Lack of moderation* and *intemperance* come to be its true

standard” (ibid: 358). Marx’s vision of money relations reveals his classical ethical thinking. Thus two virtues of Aristotelian schema – temperance and moderation – are lacking under capitalism. Instead we have an organized form of *pleonexia*: an economic system that privileges greed and excess. *Pleonexia* in the Aristotelian schema of virtues is understood as the opposite of the virtue of justice.

Marx’s analysis reveals an image of society where the means-ends relationship is reversed. Instead of affirming life in all its rich forms through free and cooperative activity, we see the whole society subjected to the needs of economic growth. Marx’s analysis illustrates this relation of human needs and capitalist production. As producers compete in the commodity market, production is not aimed at the satisfaction of human needs, but it forces the manipulation of the needs of others in order to sell the product. The truly human relationship manifesting itself through free and cooperative activity is subverted into the relation of manipulation. “Each tries to establish over the other an alien power, in the hope of thereby achieving satisfaction of his own selfish need” (ibid.).

We see from *Manuscripts* that Marx is concerned with the different ends of activity. In this respect he thinks in the Aristotelian tradition by insisting that the nature of activity changes if its ends are changed. Thus we are presented with a vision of two forms of activity: one that is free, cooperative and is done for its own sake, activity that is the expression of human powers and capabilities; and the activity done for some external reason, namely, money. Marx was concerned about the free development of essential human powers that the alienating nature of capitalism was preventing.

Marx’s analysis in *Manuscripts* is somewhat utopian in his description of communism as “fully developed naturalism, equals humanism”, as the resolution of the conflicts “between man and nature, and between man and man”, “between existence and being, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species”, as “the solution of the riddle of history” (ibid: 348). It is even tempting to suggest that he was somewhat ironic in these passages, playing with the Hegelian jargon.

Marx’s mature works give much more reasonable understanding of what is involved in overcoming alienation. Towards the end of the Volume III of *Capital*, Marx returned to the question of human flourishing. He here again expounds the same aspiration for activities that are ends in themselves, activities that are worthy of human dignity. Marx is arguing that freedom means “that development of human energy which is an end in itself”. But it is only possible outside the realm of necessity, which is economic production. Marx ends the passage with the call to shorten the working day in order to create as much as possible time for free human activities (Marx 1992a: 959).

AESTHETICS OR ETHICS?

In reconstructing the ethical foundations of Marx’s thought, the question of how to interpret Marx’s notion of nonalienated activity occupies a central position. One influential interpretation argues that it should be understood through the analogy of artistic creation. Art, as the free and spontaneous expression of creative impulses, according to this interpretation, provides the best model to interpret Marx’s notion of human flourishing. This interpretation is defended by Terry Eagleton: “Art is an image of nonalienated labour” (Eagleton 2011: 123). The activities that form human *Gattungswesen* are done for the sake of themselves and the satisfaction they bring and not for any external purpose. Art is the noblest example of this type of activity; it is the most ideal example of human freedom and creative powers.

But the reading of Marx as a moral philosopher expresses doubts regarding the analogy of art. It is not so much that this model is absolutely wrong, but it is too one-sided. Art should not become the universal model of nonalienated activity because it is only one of the many forms of activity that Marx named with the term "production". Also, art can be alienated like any other activity. It is much more useful to talk about the variety of human activities and their ends. It is the freedom of these activities from the dictates of profit and money that the critique of alienation is concerned.

One of the most important attempts to interpret Marx's notion of nonalienated activity in terms of moral philosophy was provided by Eugene Kamenka. Kamenka argues that instead of thinking of nonalienated activity as simply aesthetic activity, we should understand it also as a good activity, an activity that creates a certain kind of social relations between individuals. Kamenka is describing nonalienated activity as aiming to secure particular goods through social cooperation. Goods are not egotistic, but social; they have history and exist independently of particular individuals, and a good activity involves self-transformation. Goods, according to Kamenka, "give the individual the capacity of transcending himself, of devoting himself to a movement of which he is merely a vehicle, which existed before him, exists in others beside him and will continue to exist after him. In so far as these goods exist within him, he feels no tension, no conflict, between him and others possessed by the same spirit. It is in this sense that Marx is rightly able to say that the opposition between individual and 'social' demands disappears, that wants and enjoyments lose their egoistic nature" (Kamenka 1972: 111).

Kamenka follows the Marx's argument that alienation destroys the cooperative relations between individuals. Thus nonalienated activity should be understood with reference to the activity that forms the relations of social cooperation. Based on this, Kamenka distinguishes between the morality of the producer and the egotism of the consumer:

"The producer emphasizes activities, a way of life, a morality; he is stirred by production everywhere and brought together by the productive spirit with other producers. The consumer emphasizes ends, things to be secured; he subordinates himself and his activity to these ends; his sentiments are not productive but proprietary and consumptive; his relations with other consumers involve friction, hypocrisy and envy" (Kamenka 1972: 113).

Kamenka's arguments are important because they provide a reading of Marx's thought in ethical terms. Moral terms used by Kamenka are not, evidently, Marx's. But Kamenka argues that his moral vocabulary of objective goods expresses the ethical foundations of Marx's thought much better than the model of art.

ARISTOTLE AND MARX

Alasdair MacIntyre attempted to bring Marx's ideas closer to his own version of Aristotelian ethics. In his essay "The *Theses of Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken" (1998), MacIntyre provided an interpretation of Marx's attempt to break with the philosophical standpoint of civil society. Thus Marx's 10th thesis is the following: "The standpoint of the old materialism is civil society; the standpoint of the new is human society or social humanity." (Marx, Engels 1998: 571). The standpoint of civil society is characterised by the analytical priority of isolated individuals and their desires, making the society the outcome of contract. Human relationships are characterised, summarised MacIntyre, through such concepts as "those of utility, of contract, and of individual rights". Accordingly, the dominant moral philosophy under civil society will debate about these terms and their application (MacIntyre 1998: 223).

Marx argued that the standpoint of civil society cannot be overcome by the theory alone. It requires a particular type of activity that Marx variously calls “objective activity” (1st thesis), “practical-critical”, “revolutionary” (2nd thesis), “revolutionizing activity” (3rd thesis). MacIntyre focuses on what Marx calls “objective [gegenständliche] activity”. This term, taken from Fichte and Hegel, means a sort of activity whose end is such that by making it their own and cooperating together individuals achieve something of universal worth (ibid: 225). Marx’s biggest failure, argues MacIntyre, was that he abandoned the philosophical project sketched in the *Thesis*. If he had continued the philosophical studies of what was involved in overcoming the standpoint of civil society, Marx would have understood that the Aristotelian vocabulary is best suited to develop the notion of “objective activity”. Thus MacIntyre offers an interpretation of “objective activity” that makes it correspond to his own theory of practices: “the ends of any type of practice involving what Marx calls objective activity are characterizable antecedently to and independently of any characterization of the desires of the particular individuals who happen to engage in it. Individuals discover in the ends of any such practice goods common to all who engage in it, goods internal to and specific to that particular type of practice, which they can make their own only by allowing their participation in the activity to effect a transformation in the desires which they initially brought with them to the activity. Thus in the course of doing whatever has to be done to achieve those goods, they also transform themselves through what is at once change in their desires and an acquisition of those intellectual and moral virtues and those intellectual, psychical and imaginative skills necessary to achieve the goods of that particular practice” (ibid: 225–226).

MacIntyre developed his idea of practice by attempting to formulate a modern version of Aristotelian ethics. Practices, as MacIntyre discussed them in *After Virtue*, are socially established, cooperative activities that have their own internal ends, or goods. By aiming at those internal goods individuals transform their desires and develop essential human powers as well as acquire moral and intellectual virtues (MacIntyre 2007: 186). MacIntyre distinguishes practices from institutions. Institutions aim at external goods, such as money or status. Alienation, interpreted in MacIntyre’s terms, would mean that institutions subjugate practices to their needs: instead of realizing the internal goods of practices, individuals reach for external rewards. In the process, practices deteriorate and cooperation is changed into competition. Nonalienated practices are essential for human flourishing, as they are the main arena for the development of “human energy which is an end in itself”. This reading of objective activity in terms of practice comes close to Kamenka’s ethical interpretation of nonalienated activities.

James Daly continued the Aristotelian interpretation of Marx’s thought. By re-examining Marx’s concept of justice in the light of moral philosophy, Daly claimed that Marx is basically an Aristotelian thinker: “Marx’s idea of human good is analogous to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*” (Daly 1996: 117). Daly acknowledges the importance of MacIntyre’s research in order to reconstruct Marx’s ethical thought. He agrees that Marx’s ethical thought remained obscure and largely ignored in the Marxist tradition. MacIntyre’s critique of modern morality and his turn to Aristotelianism provide the necessary philosophical resources to understand the ethical significance of Marx’s thought.

Of course, some Marx’s scholars raised doubts whether Marx’s idea of human nature as practical and historically changing could be made compatible with Aristotelian essentialism (for example, Margolis 1992). But there MacIntyre’s reformulation of Aristotelian ethics is so significant. MacIntyre’s account of practices, virtues and internal goods is historical and sustainable without Aristotle’s metaphysical view of human nature.

On the other hand, some Marx's scholars took essentialism seriously and claimed that there is no contradiction between essentialism and historicism in Marx's account. Marx believed in the essential human nature with its different historical manifestations (see Geras 1983; Meikle 1985). Thus the realization of human nature is frustrated under alienated class societies. Overcoming of alienation is necessary to realize the essential human nature, to develop freely human powers and capabilities. Scott Meikle even doubted whether Marx was an economist at all: according to Meikle we should read *Capital* as a treatise in ethics and metaphysics (Meikle 1994). James Daly also argued that Marx's rejection of capitalism is based on transhistorical ethical foundations. According to Daly, Marx's ethical thought is compatible with the classical tradition of natural law that acknowledges the demands of justice arising from the objectively conceived human good.

Marx stands in the tradition where ethics is understood not as an abstract "ought" or "moral law", or as negative prohibition, but as having a positive role for human flourishing. Thus Mészáros summed up Marx's ethical thought: "Morality is a positive function of society: of a man struggling with the task of his own realization" (Mészáros 2005: 189). Interpreted in such way, Marx's ethical conception could be expressed as a continuation of the same Aristotelian ethical scheme that MacIntyre summed up as the distinction between man-as-he-happens-to-be and man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realised-his-essential-nature (MacIntyre 2007: 52–53). The ethics of *aretai* then provides a positive function in facilitating the movement towards the realisation of human *telos*. For Aristotle, this required the creation of the best polis. In Marx's terms, it is the distinction between human life under alienated relations and the future possibility of human flourishing. Marx saw the collective struggles against alienating institutions and social relations as the main force for moral development.

The best illustration of how the MacIntyrean/Aristotelian vocabulary is finally accepted in Marxist scholarship is Paul Blackledge's *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution* (2012). Blackledge claims that "Marx's ethics amounts to a modern version of Aristotle's account of those practices underpinning the virtues through which individuals are able to flourish within communities" (Blackledge 2012: 3). Thus MacIntyre's concepts of practices and their relation to moral development and human flourishing are used to formulate Marx's notion of the good life. If MacIntyre saw these terms as compatible with the ideas of *The Theses on Feuerbach*, Blackledge is using them to comment on Marx's ethical thought as a whole. In this way, a conceptual continuity is established between the ethical foundations of Marx's thought and Aristotelian ethics reread in MacIntyre's terms.

CONCLUSIONS

The interpretations of Marx's idea of nonalienated activity, discussed in this paper, aims to challenge the aesthetic model that interprets nonalienated activity through the analogy of art as the free expression of human creativity. Instead, it is tempting to read Marx's ideas of alienation and human flourishing through the categories of moral philosophy. The Aristotelian notion of human flourishing is argued to be the best conception to understand the ethical foundations of Marx's thought. Nonalienated activity is understood as an activity aiming at social cooperation and realization of goods. It was argued that Alasdair MacIntyre's analysis of practices and institutions provide a significant contribution for interpretation of the ethical foundations of Marx's thought. Nonalienated activity aims at the realization of goods internal to various practices thus extending human powers and educating into virtues necessary for social cooperation. Alienation means the subjection of practices for the dictate of external goods, such as power or money.

It is claimed that the ethical side of Marx's thought remained largely ignored in the Marxist tradition. The reconstruction of Marx's moral philosophy also means that Marx's ideas are interpreted through a different vocabulary than Marx used himself. Marx, reread in this manner, is understood to be in dialogue with various moral philosophies, or even as continuing some earlier traditions of ethical thought. The significance of the Marxist critique of capitalism is grounded in the ethical account of human good.

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EGIDIJUS MARDOSAS

Marksizmas ir aristoteliška etika

Santrauka

Straipsnyje apžvelgiama šiuolaikinių autorių „marksistų“ atsigręžimas į Karlą Marką kaip moralės filosofą. Šios interpretacijos akcentuoja ankstyvųjų K. Markso idėjų reikšmę bei interpretuoja jas įvairių moralės filosofijos tradicijų kontekste. Dažnai atrandamas ryšys tarp Markso idėjų ir aristoteliškos dorybių etikos. Taip pat pabrėžiama Alasdairo MacIntyre'o moralės filosofijos darbų įtaka aristoteliškam marksizmo interpretavimui.

Raktažodžiai: susvetimėjimas, etika, žmogiškasis klestėjimas, praktika, Aristotelis, Marksas