

MARX'S MATERIALISM AND THE CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY

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Should we think of Marx as a philosopher? Certainly not by his own estimation. While both still in their twenties, Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels embarked on a project to 'settle accounts' with their 'former philosophical conscience', in a set of critical texts that we have since come to know as *The German Ideology*. In these writings they develop a critique of the philosophy of their time, which they saw as engaged in ghostly battles against illusions of consciousness, far removed from the relationships, conflicts and material (i.e. economic) interests that characterised the real life of real people. In another set of notes composed around this time (the 'Theses on Feuerbach') Marx famously asserted that philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point however *was to change it*. Intimations of this dissatisfaction with philosophy's abstract and rarified concerns had been signalled much earlier in Marx's life. As a teenage university student Marx composed a poem in which he jibed that 'Kant and Fichte gladly roam the ether, Searching for a distant land / While I only seek to thoroughly understand What I found in the street.' Indeed, this commitment to comprehending (and, eventually, to changing) the concrete reality lived by concrete individuals, rather than contemplation of truth or being or consciousness as such, was precisely, as I will suggest in what follows, what pushed Marx's thinking beyond the limits of philosophy.

Marx's rupture with philosophy did not result from a process of disinterested intellectual enquiry (a philosophical critique of philosophy) but rather as a necessary consequence of his own involvement and intervention in the communist movement of his day; as an integral part of his attempt to produce a theory capable of grasping and guiding a movement of radical social change, of overcoming the aporias, obstacles and contradictions — both theoretical and political — in which the revolutionary movement found itself at the time. For Marx, adequately theorising revolution turns out to require a revolution in theory.

Although this theoretical revolution unfolded across Marx's life, culminating in his unfinished masterwork *Capital: a critique of political economy*, its point of departure can be identified in a radicalisation of philosophical critique, whose exemplary form Marx located in Hegel's idealism.

Hegel had been fiercely critical of philosophies which set out with a fixed and unproven set of concepts and categories, applying them indifferently to whatever would be encountered in reality. To proceed in this way, Hegel argued, would be to do violence to reality, to recognise only that which corresponded to those concepts and to filter out everything else. By contrast, he insisted that philosophy had to begin with whatever content was given to thinking most immediately – an apparently direct and simple reality or object – in order to uncover the hidden tensions and contradictions contained within it, and to work through these apparent contradictions to establish the underlying conditions that gave rise to them. In this way, philosophy would not impose distorting or reductive presuppositions upon given reality from ‘outside’ that reality, but rather work toward comprehending that reality in its full complexity (what Hegel called its ‘concreteness’) from within – what has sometimes been called an ‘immanent’ critique.

FOR MARX, ADEQUATELY THEORISING REVOLUTION TURNS OUT TO REQUIRE A REVOLUTION IN THEORY

Like many of his contemporaries, Marx had been deeply influenced by Hegel’s philosophy and the model of immanent critique it offered. Yet within a few years he had announced a break with Hegel, whom he treated as the representative of idealism and even, at points, of all philosophy as such. As Marx set out in several detailed and coruscating critiques, the issue with (Hegelian) philosophy was not that it presupposed some *particular set* of concepts which it then imposed onto the reality it sought to understand, but rather that it presupposed that the truth of reality was ultimately *conceptual*: that ‘thought’ had priority over ‘being’. Philosophy’s ‘medium of existence’ was the domain of conceptuality. Thus, when taken to constitute a self-sufficient and enclosed system, philosophy could only ever grasp the truth of reality in the terms of concepts and their relations. This form of idealism was, Marx charged, committed to translating every real phenomenon into a thought-form in order for it to count as real: it sought to discover ‘the determinations of the concepts of logic at

every point’. Crucially for Marx, this included relations between individuals, political institutions and even the movement of history itself. There were all simply moments of the ‘absolute idea’ in its process of self-actualisation. Hegel’s ‘concrete’, then, remained an *idealised* concreteness and therefore, Marx insisted not truly concrete at all, but merely reality’s *abstract, spiritualised* and thus *distorted* representation.

In what (or where) then, was reality in its true concreteness to be found? How was reality or objectivity to be grasped, if not in the conceptual medium of a ‘self-sufficient’ philosophy?

As Marx developed his attack on idealism he drew on the materialist critique of religion that had been developed by a fellow ‘young Hegelian’, Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach had argued that religion involved a process of inversion. Human beings invented the idea of a supreme being, but then subsequently came to believe that their own creation – god – was the source of their reality and thus unwittingly endowed this abstraction with power over them. This power, however, was nothing more than the alienated and mystified expression of *human powers* projected onto a non-human entity (these notions of inversion and alienation would remain a central, evolving motif in Marx’s critique of capitalism). In a similar way, idealist philosophy had given abstract ideas priority over the real humans that produced them and on which they truly depended. Materialism sought to bring these spiritual abstractions – philosophical and religious – back down to earth, to show that living, natural, suffering individuals, made of ‘flesh and blood’, were the ‘earthly’ basis of abstract ideas and entities. Reality as a process was propelled not by an unseen supreme being or ‘the idea’, but by the concrete action of natural beings, members of the human species in relation with one another. This seemed a far more appealing perspective from which to theorize revolutionary transformation, and Marx excitedly declared in a letter to Feuerbach that his writings had provided ‘a philosophical basis for socialism’.

Yet Marx soon became disillusioned too with Feuerbach’s materialism. In a short set of fragments from this period, discovered in a notebook after his death, Marx sketched out the limitations of Feuerbach’s outlook with respect to the task of a revolutionary theory. In the first of these ‘Theses on Feuerbach’, we find a critique of both idealism and materialism. Marx notes there that the long-standing tradition of philosophical materialism, of which Feuerbach was only the latest representative, suffered from a consistent defect: it

sought to understand all reality in the terms of sensible 'intuition', or empirical observation. In doing so, it assumed a relation between a passive, observing subject and an external, material object. Within this 'materialist-empiricist' perspective we may grasp reality in terms of how it impinges upon our senses, yet we remain passive bystanders in the face of a mechanical and deterministic universe 'out there', existing beyond our thoughts and subjective intentions (and, ultimately, unaffected by them). Things may happen, the world may change, but not because the subject consciously intervenes to make it so. For materialism, such change can only be the effect of *external*, objective processes and dynamics that we merely become aware of through sensory observation.

For Marx, this perspective was completely inadequate to the task of theorising the kind of revolutionary, world-transforming activity that communism called for. Ironically, as Marx went on to note, it was in fact *idealism* that had sought to grasp the 'active' side of reality that traditional materialism had neglected. Hegel's philosophy, much like Kant and Fichte's before him, had made the conscious activity of the subject absolutely central to the constitution of actuality; the subject-object relation was thus understood by idealism as an interactive, reciprocally determining process (Hegel even spoke of 'labour'). Yet for all its efforts, idealism could only conceptualise this activity *abstractly*, as mental labour, since, Marx pointed out, idealism does not know real, material, 'sensuous' activity. It recognised the subject's active role in shaping the world, but *misrecognised* this activity as mere thinking, intellectual work. Idealism was thus the bearer of a valid principle which, nevertheless, it distorted and mystified.

Marx, then, identifies both strengths and limitations in idealist and materialist philosophy. Idealism was correct to emphasize the active role of the human subject in shaping reality (as well as being shaped by it in turn), yet it fell short in grasping that activity only in its abstract, immaterial aspect, as intellectual activity, thinking. Materialism, conversely, was correct to insist on reality's externality and irreducibility to the intellect, its sensuous, living, material character, yet it fell short in failing to acknowledge that the human subject is more than a merely passive contemplator of this material reality (a 'sensing' but not 'acting' subject). For Marx, revolutionary theory aims at something which would be impossible for either of these philosophies to be able to account for due to their blind spots: an idea of human activity as at once both *active* and *material* (or as Marx calls it, 'sensuous'); A human subject who does not just

think or *sense* an objective reality that confronts it, but is also embedded in that reality as an objective being, capable of objective activity. Marx equates this objective activity with 'revolutionary' activity, the thinking of which will demand a new conceptual framework that goes beyond the idealism-materialism opposition.

WHAT EACH INDIVIDUAL HUMAN IS, AND THEREFORE WHAT EACH INDIVIDUAL HUMAN DOES, CAN ONLY BE UNDERSTOOD BY LOOKING AT THE RELATIONS BETWEEN INDIVIDUALS IN SOCIETY

Indeed, in spite of this apparent opposition between idealism and materialism, Marx's challenge reveals an aspect in which, counterintuitively, these two systems are in fact in deep *agreement*. Both idealism and materialism take the binary of thought and being (or thought and matter) for granted, only differing in which of one of the two elements they take as the basis of reality. For idealism, thought is primary and being is to be explained from it; for materialism, matter is primary and thought can only ever be an effect of material processes (as, for example, in modern 'physicalism', where consciousness is reducible to physical processes in the brain, such as neurons firing). In this sense, all Feuerbach had achieved was to flip Hegel's philosophy upside down, placing 'being' before 'thought'. Marx's ambitions are far greater.

Yet simply affirming that human reality is 'practical', which is to say, at once active *and* material – an interactive, embodied, material relationship with the external world and external others, who are also embodied, living, natural beings – is not enough to push Marx beyond the field of philosophy. After all, this might only be a new kind of general philosophical outlook (albeit a highly original one). Some readers of Marx have indeed called this a 'philosophy of praxis' (the German term for 'practice'). The crucial step that takes Marx beyond the philosophical realm, comes when he conceptualises the human subject behind this practice, the one who is embedded *in* and interacting materially *with* the world. For Marx, we cannot

explain the human subject by referring to enduring natural laws or regularities, such as biological instincts (e.g. grasping the human subject simply as a member of the species *homo sapiens*) for this would be to revert to traditional, deterministic materialism. Nor, for Marx, can we explain the human subject by referring to timeless mental laws, reason, logic, general theories of consciousness, etc. for this would be to revert to idealism. Marx's radical innovation, which would plot his route beyond philosophy (in its idealist and materialist modes) was to reject the idea of a natural *or* intellectual essence of the human being which would be the same in each and every human, in all places, throughout all history.

REVOLUTION WOULD BE THE REMAKING OF SOCIETY, AND AS A RESULT, THE REMAKING OF HUMAN BEINGS

Instead, Marx firstly seeks to redefine the human essence as *social*, or more specifically as an 'ensemble of social relations' connecting a multitude of individuals in reciprocal relations of interdependence. What each individual human is, and therefore what each individual human does, can only be understood by looking at the relations *between* individuals *in society* (here Marx was building on ideas already set out by Hegel, although in an idealistic fashion). And, secondly, because these social relations can and do change – there are of course different kinds of societies, each with different ways of organising the relationships between their members – the human essence is not only social, it is also *historical*. Marx thus begins to set out the key aspects of his new theoretical approach: it is a 'new materialism', at once *practical*, *social* and *historical*. This pushes philosophical discourse – which in so many of its forms seeks only to discover conceptual and ahistorical truths – to its limits.

In identifying practical activity and the relations that organise it as the key to social reality, Marx also clearly identifies that which would have to be changed in order for a different kind of social life to be brought about. Human 'practice' is what makes and remakes human reality, through our interaction with nature, under given historical and social circumstances, using the tools

and technologies available and within the constraints of social institutions, rules, norms, cultural forms, etc. In doing so, humans collectively produce and reproduce themselves as *particular kinds* of human individuals, living in a *particular kind* of society. Revolution then, for Marx, implies a revolution in (and through) our practical activity and all of the conditions which structure, constrain and enable it; the way we make and remake the world and ourselves on a daily basis through our material actions. Revolution would be the remaking of society, and as a result, the remaking of human beings.

This practical, revolutionary materialism requires no abstract theoretical or philosophical 'first principles' with which to begin. As Marx and Engels declare, 'the premises are already in existence', they are the forms in which we live, act, relate to one another and to nature in order to reproduce our lives in our present society. The theoretical foundations of communism are not therefore to be derived from general (philosophical) concepts of 'the human', of the physical universe, of reason, of nature, etc. but rather from a rigorous and relentlessly critical interrogation of how our practical, collective existence is *already* structured, regulated, dominated, incentivised and coerced in particular forms within society that surrounds us. And, as we have seen, the first step towards such an interrogation was the overcoming of the philosophical outlook – its theoreticism, its naïve desire to change the world through abstract ideas (whether of 'reason' or 'matter') – that gave rise to an abstract account of reality, and so too of the possibilities of its transformation. Marx was driven beyond the realm of philosophical reflection, transcending its enclosed plane of analysis and reflection, by his revolutionary commitments.

But what, then, becomes of thinking and philosophy once Marx has reached this point of theoretical development? What becomes the status of concepts and the conceptual sphere in the wake of this new materialism? Marx certainly gives philosophy short shrift in his writings of this time, famously declaring that 'Philosophy and the study of the real world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love'. Yet it would be wrong to assume that in his 'leap out it' Marx simply does away with philosophy altogether, as a confused and impotent (at best) or counter-revolutionary (at worst) endeavour. On closer examination, it becomes clear that in order to break through the limita-

tions of a philosophical perspective, Marx continually and consistently appropriates, modifies and redeploys philosophical resources, whether ancient Greek ideas of nature, German philosophy's notion of critique, Feuerbach's anthropology or, perhaps most importantly, Hegel's dialectical method (which Marx later claimed as a crucial influence in the development of his masterwork, *Capital*). Marx thus makes use of philosophical elements (concepts, methods, standpoints) to explode the 'self-sufficiency' of traditional philosophical discourse (which would require nothing beyond itself -beyond mere thinking- in order to resolve any and every problem it encounters). At the same time, he fuses these philosophical elements in unprecedented ways with historical, social, natural-scientific and economic elements, as he develops and refines his theoretical framework in response to the task of a revolutionary discourse: the critical comprehension of the real, material conditions that give rise to a particular historical form of life, that sustain the suffering and exploitation of people and nature whilst, at the same time, creating the conditions of possibility, even if only barely perceptible, for something different and better.

As this practical, materialist outlook – what Marx and Engels at one point call the 'science of history' – evolved, it also developed a new perspective on many longstanding philosophical concerns regarding modes of consciousness and the knowledge of reality. For Marx, it is not sufficient to simply resolve – as Feuerbach did – the spiritual and abstract creations of the human mind into their earthly basis, to plainly (and abstractly) assert that *everything* is practical (in some general, ahistorical sense). As Marx would argue in *Capital*, 'the only materialist, and therefore the only scientific' method, was one which sought to account for why a *particular* set of material conditions – a particular form of organising practical life – gave rise to *particular* forms of perceiving (and misperceiving) the world, forms of understanding and consciousness, of what can come to appear as natural or social, truthful or false, plausible and implausible, possible and impossible, etc. This method not only provides the key to unlocking seemingly interminable scholastic debates over truth and the 'reality or unreality of thinking', but also (are more importantly) enabled Marx to understand how social conditions constrain the possibilities for a theory

to be widely recognised as valid, and thus why a *critical* rather than positive discourse on social reality might be required for communist theory.

What was achieved by this materialist attack on philosophy left Marx a task yet to be accomplished: to develop an understanding of the process of material life (and its internal contradictions) in its historically specific social forms. This took Marx from the study of the ideological and abstract forms of philosophical thought to the study of the structures of the capitalist economy through which human activity is organised in the modern world. Marx would go on to dedicate his life to the analysis of capitalist social relations, to the study of the 'capitalist mode of production and the relations of production and exchange corresponding to it'. However, even in his later, so-called 'economic' writings, Marx continues to rely on philosophical methods and concepts (essence and appearance, universal and particular, subject and object, etc.) to make sense of and organise his critical investigation of capitalism. Whether we consider this project to be *post-philosophical* or simply another of the many reinventions that philosophy has undergone matters less than coming to terms with the radical consequences it has for thinking and acting in our world, after Marx.

WHAT WAS MARX'S CONCEPT OF IDEOLOGY?

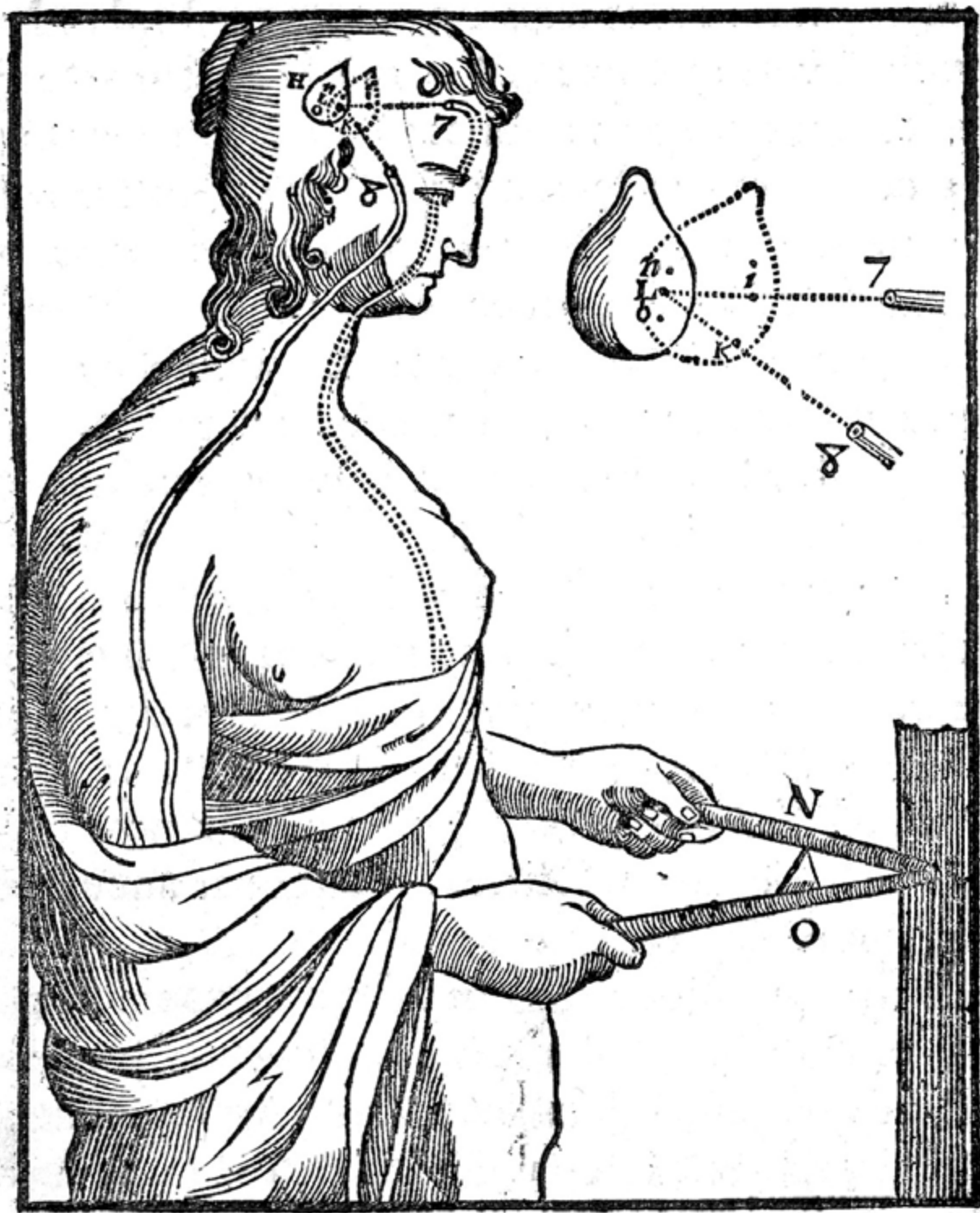
by **Sandro Brito Rojas**

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Today, as it has increasingly become a cliché to say, ideology can mean almost anything among social theorists, philosophers and social scientists (with Marxist or non-Marxist backgrounds). It can refer to a wide range of meanings, which we can roughly group into two different approaches: a *neutral* conception of ideology and a *critical* or *negative* one.

A *neutral* conception of ideology encompasses primarily philosophical and sociological perspectives that centre on agents' self-understanding and the social role of ideas. Within this framework, various conceptualisations of ideology emerge: (1) as a set of ideas specific to a particular group or social class which function as action-oriented beliefs, or (2) as a system of representations through which individuals make sense of their reality and navigate their relationships with social structures (what in some strands of recent philosophy is called a "standpoint") or (3) as the system of representations along with their embodiment in institutions that ultimately determine and shape the consciousness and practice of agents. Following the deaths of Marx and Engels and until at least the late 1950s, Marxist debates were characterised by adherence to a *neutral* conception of ideology, giving rise, for example, to an affirmative usage of the term "ideology", based on the premise that class struggle inherently entailed an ideological conflict – "a struggle between ideas" – thus affirming a proletarian, revolutionary or Marxist ideology in opposition to bourgeois ideology. It should be noted, however, that Marx himself never employed the term in this manner.

The *critical* approach, on the other hand, consists of perspectives that seek to denounce or reveal discourses and ideas as being false, untrue, and/or unconsciously distorted, expressing hidden or concealed interests or legitimization of some kind of power. These conceptions thus entail exercising some sort of "ideology critique" that reveals the ideological character of a set of ideas or forms of consciousness. This way, within critical approaches, ideology may refer to: (1) discourse and ideas driven or motivated by concealed social interests; (2) the utilisation and defence of ideas – not necessarily false ones – to legitimise dominant political or economic powers; (3) systematically distorted communication; (4) the opposite of a "scientific" (or "objective") point of



view; (5) the entanglement of discourse and power; (6) forms of alienated consciousness that distort or conceal reality; (7) apologetic discourses and naturalizations of certain dominant social facts. The principal sense in which Marx employed the concept of ideology underpins and in fact inaugurates this critical approach that is central to the modern semantics of the term. Needless to say, phenomena that we might recognise as ideology or ideological (e.g., intellectual-discursive legitimation of the social order and biased distortions of reality) have evidently existed long before the coining of the (critical) concept of ideology.

Finally, it is important to mention that running through these two approaches or frameworks, there is also a division between those – most commonly – who emphasise the ideal, spiritual reality of ideology and those who focus on the materiality of ideology, or the way in which this ideal reality is embodied in material structures, practices, and institutions that possess the power to shape social agents and their actions.

As we can see then, ideology is a concept imbued with a dense, complex range of meanings. There is no way of combining all of them into a grand totalising theory without falling into eclecticism. A better way to deal with this contemporary semantic pandemonium will be to assess what is valuable or what can be discarded in each of these approaches. One central task in this regard is to clarify Marx's use of the concept, which, while not always methodically systematic, remains without doubt one of the most theoretically and philosophically significant and influential accounts of ideology.

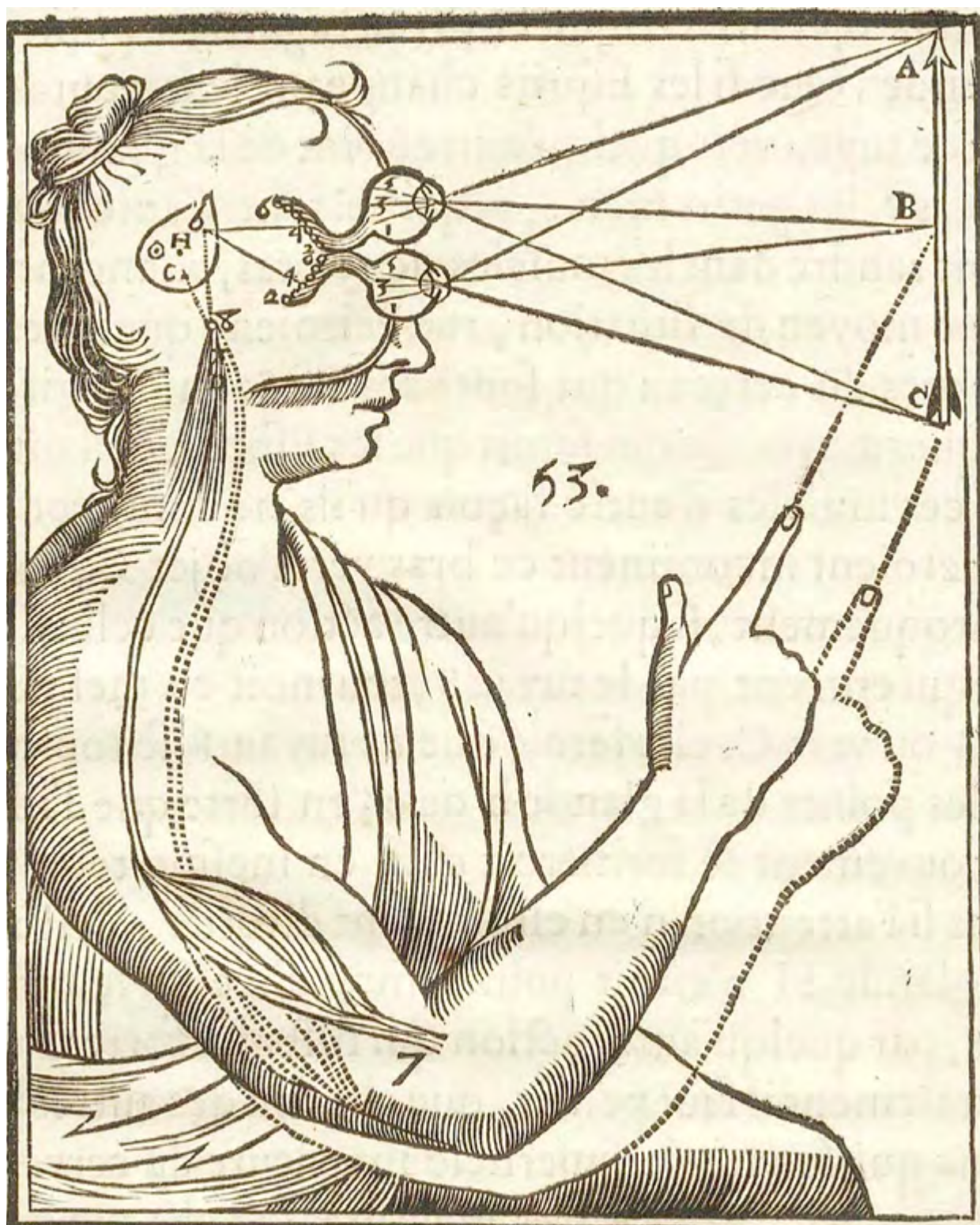
Ideology is a relatively recent term. Emerging in the modern era, the term was coined and developed at the turn of the 18th to the 19th century by Destutt de Tracy, a French liberal philosopher and politician of the late Enlightenment whose economic investigations would be relentlessly criticised by Marx in *Capital*, where de Tracy is referred to as a “fish-blooded bourgeois doctrinaire”. For de Tracy, the term was meant to denote – somewhat curiously to us now – its etymological meaning: a science of ideas. This was a novel scientific endeavour rooted in Condillac's philosophy of “sensationalism”, which sought to systematise the study of the origin and formation of

ideas, starting from the assumption of an identity between sensing and thinking.

A historically significant (yet somewhat vague) use of the term was introduced a few years later by none other than Napoleon, precisely in his diatribes against de Tracy and the group of intellectuals from the revolutionary elite to which he belonged. The (by then) emperor condemned “the science of ideology” and its leading representatives – whom he baptized as the *ideologues* – denouncing it as a source of “metaphysical speculations”, abstractions detached from French reality, and incapable of helping to resolve its problems. Napoleon was thus the first to use the term in a pejorative and denunciatory sense, to refer to ideas divorced from the political reality to which they were addressed. The manner in which Napoleon used the term soon became influential and ideology began to be used in a pejorative, disqualifying sense. Indeed, this Napoleonic use was the direct precursor of the critical uses of the term, and of Marx's development of the concept.

The terms “ideology”, “ideological”, etc. appear in many of Marx's texts, though mostly incidentally (with the exception of *The German Ideology*). Nevertheless, the social phenomena and relationships to which the concept responds are present in Marx's writings, even when the word is not, from his young philosophical inquiries, to his critique of philosophy, to his principal project: the critique of political economy.

Two texts, written at different stages of Marx's scientific, critical, and revolutionary journey, have become the principal sources of both understandings and misunderstandings regarding his conception of ideology. First, the collection of texts that we have come to know as the book *The German Ideology*, which represent a key moment in his critique of philosophy and the process of self clarification in which he (and Engels) were engaged during the decade of 1840s. Secondly, the Preface to the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859), a text in which Marx attempts to give a brief account of how he arrived at the project of a critique of political economy. So these two texts, we could say, opened the theoretical space in which ideology has been debated until today. Yet it is also worth noting that Marx's infamous discussion of “The Fetishistic Character of the Commodity and its Secret” in *Capital* can be seen as another crucial text for grasping what ideology is for Marx. There,



Marx shows how capitalist production relations – the private and independent production of useful things as commodities to be sold on the market – gives rise, due to its own structure and conditions, to certain social forms of appearance and inversion that obscure and naturalize this specific form in which collective life is organised and reproduced. Thus, Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism enables us to grasp how there can be a certain "ideology" inscribed within "material" conditions.

THE REAL PROBLEMS OF HUMANITY ARE NOT IDEOLOGIES, BUT SOCIAL CONTRADICTIONS ARISING FROM THE FORM IN WHICH SOCIAL LIFE IS ORGANISED

In the Preface to his *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, in trying to summarize the main tenets of his new conception of society and history, Marx introduces an architectural metaphor with which to grasp how bourgeois society forms a totality, composed of a "base" and a "superstructure" which rests upon it. The "base" here, is an *economic* unity composed of the "material forces of production" and the "relations of production appropriate to them". For Marx, this can be seen as the economic structure of society – the base, or foundation from which a legal and political superstructure immanently arises. To this superstructure, or edifice, would correspond certain specific "ideological forms" (legal, political, but also artistic, religious, philosophical, etc.) through which humans become conscious of their reality, albeit in a limited way that cannot be fully trusted. Marx insists that "just as one does not judge an individual by what they think of themselves, one cannot judge such a period [...] by its consciousness". Yet Marx's account here is replete with ambiguities: is every ideological form of consciousness a false representation of reality? If every form of consciousness within this "superstructure" is ideological in a negative sense, what about Marx's account? How can this be said to escape the distortions of reality that occur at this level? In spite of these,

this text has been perhaps the most influential and determining source in shaping how ideology has been understood among Marxists.

However, it is in an earlier text (or, in reality, a set of texts and fragments), *The German Ideology*, that Marx and Engels make more prominent use of the term, with the concept assuming a more explicitly central role. Here, we find a ruthless critique of philosophy and its understanding of social reality, in particular the tendency of German philosophers (whether idealist or materialist) to proceed from "heaven" to "earth", to explain human activity starting from ideas, concepts or abstractions. Marx acknowledges that idealism grasps, though only abstractly, that objective reality does not exist independently from humans but is also constituted by humans, by their subjective activity or "praxis". However, idealism offers a one-sided account of this subject-object relationship, mystifying the subject's power to shape reality and thereby tending to conceive and explain reality as the result of ideas, treating it as autonomous or independent from materiality. On the other hand, we have a critique of traditional forms of materialism for their inability to understand the practical, social and historical dimension of materiality. The traditional materialist does not see that "the sensuous world around him is not a thing given direct from all eternity but the product of industry and of the state of society", that *sensuous human activity* is a core part of reality. Thus in a broader sense, Marx refers to these two philosophical approaches as offering limited and distorted views of reality, labelling them as ideological.

As we know, in the unfolding of this double critique Marx, along with Engels, sets out a new conception of society and history which surpasses the limitations of both idealism and materialism, and in doing so, goes beyond the philosophical terrain of inquiry of this time, which is trapped in an abstract theoreticism. Based on this result of his critique of philosophy Marx would go on to undertake a critique of the field of economic science of his time, a "critique of political economy", as the main vehicle through which to undertake a revolutionary and scientific critique of the way in which collective human activity is organised in capitalist society.

Interpretations of Marx that revert to a "mechanistic" rather than practical materialism, which affirm that "it is not the consciousness of humans that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines

their consciousness”, fail to recognise that the objective world that humans confront is one that has also (at least in part) been shaped by human action, that humans make circumstances just as much as circumstances make humans. The new “practical materialist” point of departure taken by Marx leads us to approach the study of consciousness and ideas, and therefore of ideology, in a different manner. It urges us to start from the recognition that in order to understand the formation of ideas we must remain on the “real ground of history”, the real process of material activity, or *production*, and thus seek to explain “the formation of ideas from material practice”. The first thing to acknowledge is therefore that consciousness in general, and the production of ideas as a whole (not just ideology) are inseparable from material activity; they are “from the very beginning a social product”, “directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men”. So consciousness and language itself “only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men”.

Yet just because consciousness, language and ideas are determined by social existence and social activity, this does not necessarily make them false representations of that existence and activity. Marx thus goes on to argue that there are some historically specific sets of ideas and discourses – such as morality, religion, metaphysics and philosophy in general, political and economic thought – that *are* determined as ideology; that is, as inverted and distorted forms of consciousness of reality. The origins of Marx’s critique of an inverted consciousness of the world that conceals its true reality can be found in his early critique of religion and Hegel’s theory of the state (even though the term ideology is not used there). For Marx, all ideology involves an inversion whereby humans and their relations “appear upside-down”; an ideal and unconscious inversion that conceals the real nature of things. Yet the implication of Marx’s practical materialism – contrary to what the French Marxist Louis Althusser claimed – is that these inversions are not *mere* illusions, false ideas, simple (ir)rational errors disconnected from reality, which could be overcome merely by countering them with the correct “scientific” point of view of what things actually are. They rather arise *necessarily* from the concrete form taken by the historical life-process. The form of collective life in capitalist societies is distinctive in its inversion of our collective activity, which transforms what we ourselves produce into a “material power above us, growing out of our control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations”. Capital, Marx argues, makes the collaborative social action of humans an “alien power opposed to them”, which enslaves them instead

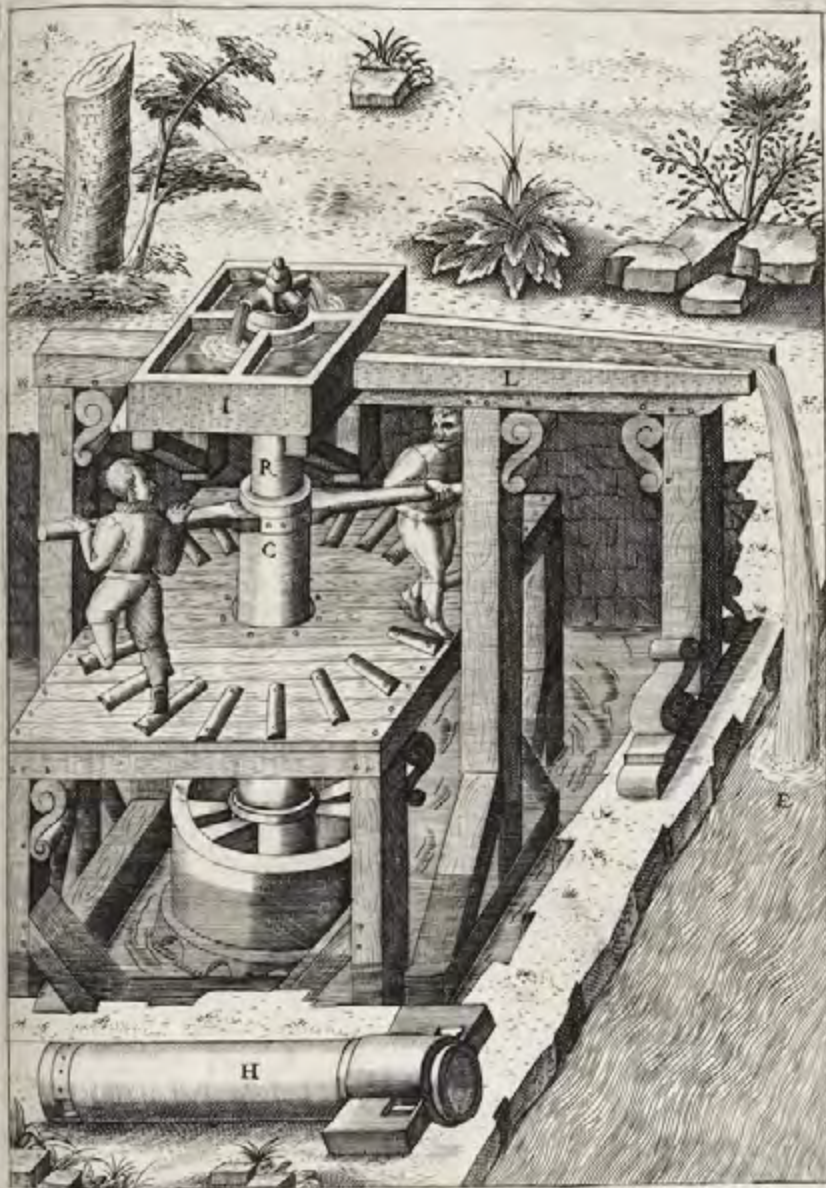
of being controlled by them. We could thus say that the possibility of the existence of ideology, of ideological ideas and representations, is grounded in very specific historical and social conditions that give rise to the *alienation* of collective human activity.

For Marx, ideology, this particular form of consciousness that loses sight of the inner relation between the material and the ideal, has a historically specific condition of possibility: the emergence of a division between material and mental labour in the organisation of collective social activity. It is precisely from this key moment that “consciousness can really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice”, that is in a position to emancipate itself from the world.”

Ideology finds its *material* basis in the alienated nature of real social relations, with all of their real contradictions and inversions. In the upside-down capitalist commodity world, “things mediate the relations among people, while there are social relations among things”; a particular social relation among people assumes, for these people themselves, “the phantasmagoric form of a relation among things”. Things produced by the human hand, as commodities, seem endowed with lives of their own, seem to be “autonomous figures interacting with one another and human beings”. Ideology is an ideal inversion and as such an ideal alienation which cannot be but the ideal expression of real, material, alienation. Ideology is therefore a *socially necessary* ideal illusion; an unconscious form of expression of the social contradictions that traverse the capitalist or bourgeois form of life, an expression which ends up affirming or legitimizing that life and concealing the possibility of another.

While it is fundamental to develop a critique of ideology in order to develop a critique of society, the fact is that “not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history, also of religion, of philosophy and all other kinds of theory”. Ideology “cannot be dissolved by mental criticism”, but only by the practical overthrow of the actual social relations which give rise to it. The real problems of humanity, then, are not ideologies, false or apologetical discourses of what it is, but social contradictions arising from the form in which social life is organised. Ideology is a consequence, not the cause, of those contradictions (though it may in turn affirm and strengthen them). Thus, any change in the realm of ideas is insufficient (and at best partial or provisional) unless it is accompanied by a material change in alienated social structures.

FIGVRE CV.



FOUR WAYS TO READ MARX'S *CAPITAL*

by Paul North

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If there is a main premise in Marx's multi-volume book, *Capital*, it is the following. In the social system that came to dominate Europe and its satellites by the mid-nineteenth century, all relations were secondary to one relation. Marx calls it "the capital relation." It looks like this. Owners hold back the means of production from workers. In order to access the materials and instruments to do the work they need to do to live, workers must capitulate to owners' demands. For Marx, this relation of extortion, and eventually exploitation, is the central fact of the epoch. It outweighs all other facts. Further, it colors all other facts. He argues in his magnum opus that social relations, even those not obviously related to this fact, are determined in a fundamental way by it. Legal relations and political relations follow from the capital relation. "It is a particular ether which determines the specific gravity of every being which has materialized within it," Marx writes in the *Grundrisse*. In the epoch of capital, other critiques, whether Enlightenment critiques of religion, critiques of metaphysics by transcendental philosophy, critiques of philosophy by radical social thinkers, or moral critiques of the state, lead attention away from the central fact. The critique of capital is the basis for all other criticism.

But the critique of capital is incomplete. This is because the central fact does not—cannot—exist on its own. The capital relation is embedded in the capital system, a moving amalgam of relations and transactions that operates as a whole. Capitalists have as little choice to hold back the means of production as workers have to go to work each day. This is because capital's extortion of labor has to be accompanied by large-scale industrial production, progressive automation through machinery, and money, lots of it, circulating constantly; it has to give rise to bankers and transport companies and warehouses and tech-heads and crises of various types. The capital system has more facets than a diamond. And although Marx began the critique of the capital system, he couldn't polish all the facets. In *Capital*, Marx developed three aspects of the critique. We can call them the *energetic-conflictual*, the *economic*, and the *dynamic* aspects of the capital system (I will explain these in what follows).

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Left largely unexplored by Marx and his best readers is a fourth aspect that I want to talk about as well. It is the *schematic* or *perspectival* aspect. It concerns the standpoints (Marx's term, and that of some German Idealists) in which the landscapes of capital are projected.

From the fourth aspect, we come to see that the capital system produces not only commodities, injustices and suffering, while reproducing itself without end. It also produces and reproduces standpoints, ways of schematizing the world. These standpoints, produced by the capital system, are multiple and incommensurable. And this raises a challenge for the struggle against the system: if we do not all live and act in the same landscape, how can we agree on what is to be done? Marx's response to this challenge seems to be to develop a standpoint from which all standpoints can be registered – something like a “standpoint of standpoints.” And yet, his response raises other questions, such as: who can occupy the standpoint of standpoints, or the standpoint of *Capital*? Readers have found it demanding, to say the least.

IF WE DO NOT ALL LIVE AND ACT IN THE SAME LANDSCAPE, HOW CAN WE AGREE ON WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Up to the present, Marx's big project, the critique of the capital system, has been read under the three main aspects I named. The *energetic-conflictual* aspect concerns antagonisms and collisions among forces. For readers aiming at emancipation, this is the aspect of choice. It tells us where and how forces confront one another. It tells us how divisions within labor and between classes emerge from conflict and produce new conflicts. A different angle altogether, the *economic* aspect concerns the equivalence logic of exchange. This aspect, which is always zero-sum, tells us why making something over here requires taking the same amount of stuff over there. It reminds us that circulation's rhythms cannot in the long run stay unbalanced. Finally, the *dynamic* aspect comprises dialectical relations plus other historical, logical, and ontological processes, usually at a larger scale. This aspect tells us how the system as a whole stays in motion. It tells us how, despite the wild contingency of its processes, it preserves itself against fundamental change, and how a future might arrive in which it dissolves. Each of the three aspects has its

moments in Marx's *Capital* project. Each has special partisans among readers, who develop doctrines, movements, and schools around their chosen aspect.

This “metacritical architectonic” organizes under a few names the broad range of phenomena that animate the system and the kinds of questions those phenomena provoke for Marx and his readers. What is a metacritical architectonic? It sounds technical, but behind the name is a commonplace thought. It collects a few distinctive ways to read this much-read book.

The metacritical architectonic tells us which structures, which functional mechanisms, what relays of sense, what clusters of interaction are essential to the capital system. At the same time, it tells us which vocabularies, which modalities of thinking, what kinds of activities are useful for capital's... eventual abolition. That is to say, the ways of reading *Capital* are critical as well as analytical. Establishing reality's elements is not the sole goal. The architectonic establishes the features of the system... for the purpose of dismantling it.

When we read *Capital*, we usually read within one of the aspects, the *energetic-conflictual*, the *economic*, or the *dynamic*, and we use one specific vocabulary, bet on its hopes, rest our arguments on its interpretive history. Those dedicated to struggle, for example, those who take the streets, join Occupy movements, read for the *energetic-conflictual* aspect. “A normal working day thus came about as the product of a protracted, more or less hidden civil war between members of the capitalist class and members of the working class,” Marx reminds us in Volume 1 of *Capital*. Under this aspect, the milieu of capital is struggle.

The critical theorist Herbert Marcuse was a devotee of this way of reading and a major developer of its idiom. He tells us how “the world of industrial civilization” suppresses basic human drives. Why are the drives suppressed in industrial society? Because of its particular form of domination of human by human. Thus one struggle suppresses another more basic one. Capital dominates labor and stops the boisterous play of eros that human society is and should become again. Beneath the imposed standstill, Marcuse imagined a fundamental contest of energies, modeled on Freud's

theories. A repressive energy and a buoyant energy confront one another. When those libidinal energies get squashed and partially or fully renounced, labor can be called “alienated.” In the face of this, Marcuse advocates liberating true struggle by freeing desire, so that exchange does not regulate intimacy and culture does not serve competition. Marcuse reads Marx thus, under the *energetic-conflictual* aspect.

Those who read for the ins and outs of exchange, in contrast, stay within the *economic* aspect. There is a trick in this aspect, however. “Economic” means, according to mainstream economics, getting back what you give out. If you don’t, there is an error or you are a bad capitalist. Mainstream economics dedicates considerable energies to correcting errors and retraining bad capitalists. Marx says something different, although he keeps a core similarity: where capital is in charge, no one gets back what they give out. Not the capitalists, who patently get more than they give, not the workers, who not so patently but no less truly get less than they give.

Marx and his readers sometimes argue from equivalence, like other economists. Nothing comes from nothing, or: values of the same magnitude are equivalent. Value is abstract labor expended in production and realized in exchange on a large market. Despite appearances, value always comes from something for Marx. It comes from its equivalent in abstract labor.

But mainstream economists cannot say where the extra magnitude, profit, comes from. Extra value beyond production costs does not appear magically on the market by buying low and selling high—this violates, as Marx shows, the very law economic thinkers presuppose, the law of equivalence. Marx and Ricardo using the same logic draw the conclusion that profit or “surplus-value” comes from the real addition of something equivalent, though hidden, in the sphere of production. And thus, although it shares the emphasis on equivalence with other economic thought, the Marxist version offers a powerful critical perspective. It reveals capitalistic labor to be exploitation, it exposes the illusions of the wage form and demonstrates how production becomes a process of “valorization,” it distinguishes “variable” and “fixed capital,” and it even has a take on nature. We don’t get something for nothing there either. When capital goes up, nature goes down.

You can tell these are separate aspects because they are not reducible to one another. The *economic* does not have the same elements or aims as the *energetic-conflictual*. Nothing in the *economic* demands struggle, for one thing. Conversely, struggle rarely knows equivalence. The *economic* is inactive and nonaligned. Its operations are stating, investigating, demonstrating, calculating, proving a discrepancy. It remains faithful to those operations and won’t go beyond them.

CRITIQUE BECOMES THE CONSTRUCTION OF A FURTHER STANDPOINT, ONE OUTSIDE THE OTHERS, A SOMEWHAT PARADOXICAL STANDPOINT OF STANDPOINTS

Although they are independent and in some ways inimical aspects, the *economic* can feed the *conflictual*. Economic arguments give shape and content and targets to struggle. Take the wage form (the salary paid to a worker to buy their working time). Nothing in the wage form leads naturally to conflict or resistance. It is made to suppress conflict, in fact, by misrepresenting unpaid labor as fully paid. When the lie of the form gets revealed, it leads to a contradiction—between the claims of the exploiter and the claims of the exploited—but not necessarily to contestation or refusal. It may be a lie, but the wage is still also someone’s means of living. “Suppose a twelve-hour workday is represented in 6 shillings of money-value,” Marx writes. “Either equivalents are exchanged, in which case the worker would receive 6 shillings for his twelve hours of labor,” leading to no production of surplus-value for the capitalist. “Or the worker could receive less than 6 shillings—less than the value of twelve hours of labor—for his twelve hours of labor,” leaving the capitalist with a surplus. The economic discrepancy between what is worked and what is paid, which remains hidden in mainstream economics and from the worker, can become a motivator. Pay us what we’re worth! In this way, the *economic aspect* gives a content to the *energetic-conflictual*.

The third metacritical aspect is more difficult to describe because it has a more philosophical intention, with grand—even grandiose—designs on history. What I am calling the *dynamic* aspect others call by other names: historical materialism, logic, dialectics, revolution—not to mention the constant technological change that keeps capital profitable. The larger dynamisms of the system fall under this rubric.

I'll give two examples, to show the scope of *dynamic* readings over the century and a half since *Capital*'s publication. The first example is well known—it involves a stadial view of history and a revolution that comes about through historical “development.” Marx's friend Friedrich Engels read in this way. Engels reminds us of the dynamism of society itself. It is false, he says, to think of capitalism as an “eternal” state of affairs. That is ideology. Society is in constant transformation, undoing its past as its forms “develop.”

THE QUESTION, WHAT IS TO BE DONE?, IS PROPERLY ANSWERED BY ASKING ANOTHER QUESTION: FROM WHAT STANDPOINT?

In *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* Engels wrote that society had developed “incompletely” and yet “the means of ending these conflicts” were silently growing in its belly. This kind of historical dynamism, a moving system with an internal countermovement, tilting toward the dissolution of the system, became a stereotype and a bludgeon in really existing socialisms (such as in the USSR) and in the belittled and hunted Marxisms of the West, a blunt theoretical instrument that nonetheless kept a wish alive. The wish was—and still is, I think—to find a way out of this abusive world-system from within, without passing through total destruction. We need only look more closely to see the new world developing inside the old.

A second, more recent example of a *dynamic* way of reading Marx's project is metabolic rift theory, which advances the idea that in capitalism a ‘rift’ emerges in the relation between human society and nature, giving rise to ecological and social crises. In this theory, what is dynamic is not classes or logic or history,

but “metabolism,” a figure Marx uses strategically throughout the volumes of *Capital*, adopting it from an agricultural chemist he admired, Justus Freiherr von Liebig. Soil, for Liebig, carries out a continual exchange of nutrients, although this chemical exchange, when compared to economic exchange, is not based on equivalence logic. Agricultural reactions leave remainders and are plagued by overflows and deficits. In *Marx's Ecology*, John Bellamy Foster isolated this dynamic, bringing back into focus Marx's “practical materialism.” Ecological, dialectical, contingent - historical, necessitarian - circular, accumulative - expansionist—there are obviously multiple dynamisms at work in Marx's account. What they are and what they teach are dealt with under the *dynamic* aspect.

Capital is not a system, however, unless it is also a set of standpoints. Marx repeats the phrase over and over in similar forms: “when considered from the standpoint of....” There are, for example, standpoints of theorists. Plato had one in his day (it was the standpoint of use-value, Marx says) and “vulgar” political economists have another in Marx's day (Marx calls it flatly “cretinism,” or the self-blind standpoint). But standpoints are not only considerations of the system from the outside, so to speak; they are not only theoretical. Before theories, standpoints arise within the system, as part of its mechanism. The system produces most of the theories about it, anyway. That is, a theory about how the system operates emerges, generally, from one of the limited standpoint within it, as vulgar political economy develops from the standpoint of blind capitalists.

There are many more. Use-value, exchange-value, production, circulation, all have their standpoints. Within circulation there is a standpoint of simple circulation and then multiple standpoints of complex circulation, dealt with exhaustively in the first chapters of Volume 2. In those chapters we learn how the very same phenomenon can be considered from at least three, as a) a part of production, b) a part of commodity circulation, or c) a part of money circulation. We also learn how a single phenomenon has different characteristics in each sphere. To give an example, at the heart of the production process, a worker puts the finishing touches on a product. In one standpoint, we encounter a worker who completes a useful thing using useful labor. In another standpoint, an industrial capitalist valorizes their commodity by means of their rented instrument, the worker. In a third, money advanced by an investor moves one step closer to a return. In Volume 2, it

becomes easier to see a few things about standpoints. They are endemic to the system. They are separate from one another, independent to a degree. Indeed, only insofar as the producer (worker), the valorizer (industrial capitalist), and the money mover (banker) are committed to different schemas can their otherwise incompatible processes link up to form a system.

That is to say, when the parts of the system work together to create value and move capital, different schemas get projected. The spheres capital passes through on its routes are independent and mutually alien. In a passage from Volume 1, Marx adds an insight. Discussing the development of the full-fledged capitalistic form of circulation, he writes that it “requires a whole web of conditions, conditions that, from the standpoint of simple commodity circulation, don’t yet exist.” Under capital, existence is schematic; the conditions in one projected schema are not the conditions in another, and thus to exist in one is not the same as to exist in another. Existence is standpunctal. What’s more, we are led to believe that if it were not like this, capital wouldn’t circulate. And so, since the standpoints are independent, essentially different, unique grounds for the existence of the objects within them, the critique of the capital system can’t proceed without adding *standpoint* to the metacritical architectonic.

The standpoint figure entered the lexicon of idealism in early post-Kantian philosophy. It was a way to make theoretical philosophy practical, to make a highly technical, intellectual act into a lived activity, and to help spread it from a few philosophers to a wider group. In short, it was an instrument of general enlightenment. Jacob Sigismund Beck, a late acolyte of Kant, declared this the main reason to read the master’s work. You read Kant not to understand, to systematize, or to debate the arguments. You read to become critical of your own knowledge, in the way he laid out in the *First Critique*. In a summary of the Kantian philosophy, Beck in 1793 praises the special moment “when one has reached the genuine standpoint of transcendental philosophy.” This is the moment at which you become a transcendental subject and your knowledge is purified of error. According to Beck, the true purpose of Kant’s philosophy was to project a standpoint that a reader could adopt. As in Beck, so in Fichte, and also in Hegel. Standpoint asserts itself when Idealists want to point out a position to be reached, in order to make abstract philosophy real. And yet, despite its frequent repetition, standpoint

remains an operative concept for them. None writes a theory of the standpoint. This is because, I think, Idealists needed the figure to articulate what can’t be articulated by concepts, that is, a non-conceptual ground for existence and practice. Yet they do not know how to treat standpoint as anything but a concept. The way the figure is used, however, tells something different. Standpoints in Idealism help to translate the realm of concepts into the realm of action, replacing subjects and substance and attributes with loci to be occupied, projections full of landmarks, plots with limits, where entities and objects are not beings but paths or obstacles to activities.

The question, what is to be done?, is properly answered by asking another question: from what standpoint? A standpoint is, functionally in Marx’s discourse, an intuition of a scape that permits certain activities and restricts others. In the formation of the capital system, scapes are basic. They may in fact be capital’s first products.

Philosophy has often been parasitic on other discourses. Talk of standpoints entered philosophy from geodesy, a science virtually unknown today, whose project and problem was constructing the shape of the earth. The problem geodetic scientists faced was constructing the earth’s shape without being able to leave it. In the late 19th-century, F.R. Helmert taught in his *Higher Geodesy* how to throw geodetic lines, locate geographical positions, distinguish between geometrical (ideal) and geographic (projected) coordinates and landmarks (observed), and fix a position from which to reckon the contorted figure of the planet that results from rotation and other skewing forces.

Such reckoning may have a “pure” purpose for the science, but it has a practical purpose as well, as John Love put it in his 1768 geodetic treatise. “How could men get down to plant, without knowing some distinction and bounds of their land?” What here is soil, what is rock, what is mine, what is yours? In this way, the projection of a scape predetermines physical, moral, legal, and economic relations.

Capital contains many standpoints, projects many distinct scapes. It might seem like there are only two, that of capitalists and that of workers. This would make things simpler, reducing everything to class struggle. But the *standpoint* aspect is different than the *energic-conflictual* aspect, at a minimum because there are many

more than two standpoints. In simple exchange, buyers inhabit one, sellers another; in an exchange economy, capitalists inhabit a third. There is a standpoint of production, the main scape projected in Volume 1. The standpoint of circulation is dealt with expansively in Volume 2, but it is actually three different ones: production, commodities, and money.

In Volume 2 we learn, surprisingly, that it is their incommensurability that allows the standpoints to interact. A commodity is the same and not the same as an item for production, and both are the same and not the same as the money into which they convert. Only when these disparate/same entities fail to coincide does capital capitalize and value valorize. This means that the standpoint of Marx's *Capital*, the critical standpoint, is the only point from which to survey the interactions among the three, and even then, the overlaps are incongruous and difficult to represent. In an economistic society organized around value production, it is impossible to occupy all standpoints. This is one of *Capital's* important teachings, and it explains why the book often arrives at its audiences as if from an alien planet.

The way Marx presents it, the capital system appears as an unfavorable congeries of schemas, a confusion of tongues, to quote the early psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi. A capitalist is "too sunk in making surplus-value to see this free gift of labor." The very activity by which capitalists make use of labor blocks out the reality of labor. If we "position ourselves," however, "in the standpoint of the worker, who receives the value-product of six hours of labor for twelve hours of labor," we cannot understand or critically access or even really encounter the mechanics of value creation, which exists for workers as something else entirely. For them, value creation is blocked by the push for "efficiency" that they feel on their bodies and at the limits of their energies.

Neither class in itself can access these phenomena in themselves, and so a major task of Marx's critique is to make one standpoint available to another, or more precisely, to construct a standpoint in which they all become available for scrutiny.

And so critique becomes the construction of a further standpoint, one outside the others, a somewhat paradoxical standpoint of standpoints. It has a utopian quality in the etymological sense. *Capital* projects a scape that is found nowhere in society. Whether such a standpoint is possible, or if possible, that it is occupiable, and if occupiable, that it will be effective for

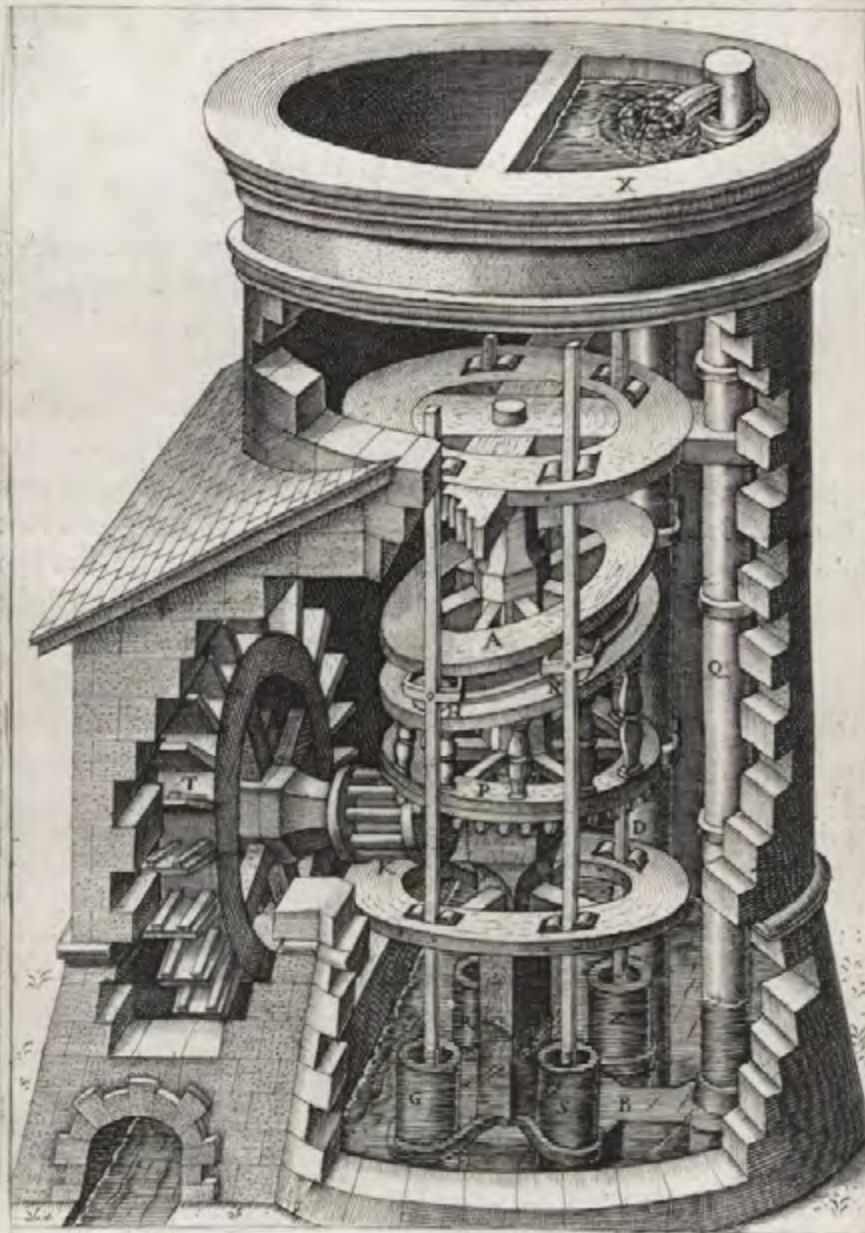
a transition out of capital, remains to be assessed. There is another difficulty here as well. If it were inhabitable and effective, the critical standpoint would require the birth of a new class, a critical class ingeniously able to move between limited standpoints without being committed to any one.

Despite the difficulties it introduces, the *perspectival-schematic* way of reading, this fourth aspect in the metacritical architectonic, does lay the accent on effectiveness. Beyond the struggle between two sides on a battleground shared by all, or economic discrepancies under a logic of equivalence, or a dynamic dialectic of categories in a history moving toward transformation, alongside these ways of reading, Marx envisions a system whose primary technology produces standpoints, whose projected scapes determine what kinds of actions can be carried out within them.

We are treated to a mode of thinking, slanted toward effective action, where separate arenas are described almost cinematically, each with its paths and obstacles, where an object named "product of my laboring hands" has another name as well, "commodity bearing value," and, in another schema, "money," and where the bearers of these standpoints talk past each other continually in a confusion of tongues. These action-oriented designations don't say what something is but how it is used, how it affects people around it, how it warps the scape and how the separation of scapes enables the system to continue its barbarities.

Perhaps this aspect is a new route to change, if we take advantage of its strengths—a practical materialist mode rather than a conceptual one, where categories give way to motivations and constraints, concepts give way to attempts and endeavors, logic gives way to paths and obstacles, arguments give way to scenarios, and the task of the critic is more like projecting another scape. For a philosophy oriented toward change, we should develop once again a geodetic imagination.

FIGVRE LVII.



SECTION 2: CONVERSATIONS

MARX'S ETHICAL VISION

VANESSA WILLS IN CONVERSATION WITH OLÚFEMI O. TÁÍWÒ

Vanessa Wills is a political philosopher, ethicist, educator, and activist based in Washington, DC, where she is Associate Professor of Philosophy at The George Washington University. Her 2024 monograph, *Marx's Ethical Vision*, is published by Oxford University Press.

Olúfemi O. Táíwò is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Georgetown University. He received his Ph.D. in philosophy at the University of California Los Angeles. He has published in academic journals ranging from *Public Affairs Quarterly*, *One Earth*, *Philosophical Papers*, and the *American Philosophical Association* newsletter *Philosophy and the Black Experience*.

Olúfemi O. Táíwò (OT): There is a deep and abiding ethical impulse under the political commitments that Marxism is associated with: socialism, communism, the fight against capitalism. When you ask people who are swimming in one of those seas what they're up to and why, they give what sounds to me—as an analytically trained moral philosopher—like moral explanations: they think there's something wrong with capitalism, something inappropriate about the way the system treats people. Yet, Marxists have often shied away from explicitly ethical thinking about capitalism. There is a sense that there's some kind of bourgeois affectation going on whenever explicitly moral thought enters into discussion. Your book is written in part as an answer to that perspective. So, what was it in your view that Marxists and non-Marxists felt they were achieving or avoiding by objecting to morality-laden interpretations of Marxism and what would we achieve by leaving that interpretation behind?

Vanessa Wills (VW): From within the Marxist tradition certainly, there's a worry that taking ethical questions seriously or foregrounding them will be part of a movement away from the scientificity of Marxist theory or the aspects of Marxism that are most operational in giving it its explanatory power and – for those of us who think it does have quite a bit of predictive power – it's predictive power as well. Marx and Engels consider human development to be knowable using the same techniques that are relevant for other areas of science.

The worry there, however, is that if human existence really is knowable for the same reasons that objects in the natural world are – namely that they're subject to some kind of scientific law that can be ascertained and then applied in order to make predictions – that feels in tension with the idea that human beings are free and that human life is susceptible to moral judgement.

So if one feels forced to choose then one chooses the scientificity, right? One chooses the economic story that Marxist theory is offering. Part of what I am doing in my book is demonstrating that we don't actually have to make this choice. We can do both, and in fact much of Marx's thought is an attempt to make normative claims that stem from an empirical and scientific accounting of human existence.

OT: Building off of that, could you identify some specific departures where your reconstructed project differs from interpretive convention, the orthodox ways of reading Marx?

VW: One place to start is with the concept of orthodoxy itself. To what extent is the received wisdom – “orthodox Marxism” – actually a reflection of what Marx himself thought?

For example, when we talk about an orthodox Marxist position on race and class, people start enumerating all sorts of positions, like the notion that ideas are mere epiphenomenon of the material base and that therefore we don’t really need to worry too much about ideas themselves; we just bring about the good work of proletariat revolution and the ideas will sort themselves out as a necessary byproduct of that. This way of thinking about the relationship between matter and ideas exists nowhere in Marx’s work.

THERE IS A DEEP AND ABIDING ETHICAL IMPULSE UNDER THE POLITICAL COMMITMENTS THAT MARXISM IS ASSOCIATED WITH: SOCIALISM, COMMUNISM, THE FIGHT AGAINST CAPITALISM

When we think about what is often described as an ‘orthodox’ Marxist position on morality, we hear similar claims being made. We hear it claimed that Marx thought human life was completely beholden to strictly mechanistic and deterministic laws. Or that Marx thought communism was inevitable, not dependent on human choice or agency in bringing it about. Because we don’t have a place where Marx lays out his complete and systematic approach to ethics, my goal is to identify what I take to be the most significant features of Marx’s method and use those in order to present the conception of morality that emerges in the book.

OT: I want to pick up specifically on the point that you raised about the relationship between matter and ideas, which is a common explanation of what Marx must have thought: that ideas don’t matter and matter matters, right? Why do people think that? Because Marx’s philosophy is described as materialist thought, it is often counterposed with idealism and the general thinking is that this implies some concern not just for the world as structured by reason and thoughts but by actual physical reality. What people take that to mean – and in turn is a crude rejection of the importance of intellectual and mental life – is that it is all guns, land, and gold at the end of the day.

Among the many reasons to reject *this* crude view that you offer later in the book is a peculiar thing that Marx says in the 1844 Manuscripts. Namely, there’s this high-level stuff about sense organs – their potentials and their actuality – that we might have thought we were going to leave behind in a view about economies and corn and linen and exchange rates, right? So, what’s all this talk of sense organs and potentialities? Why would a philosopher like Marx who usually talks about dollars and commodities find himself in this kind of metaphysical territory?

VW: One of the themes that appears throughout Marx’s writing is the historicity of human senses. He will speak, for example, of how the human ear becomes something more than just its biological physiology and architecture, that the capacity to hear is historically produced over the course of generations, over the historical development of music, of ways of speaking. The ear’s sensitivity to the nuances of sound, music, and communication of all kinds is not solely given by its bare natural character, but by its social transformation. The same is true for the eyes and for all our senses. Furthermore, he also speaks of a *human* sense: this activity of perceiving other human beings and understanding them as ourselves, and recognizing that we share our conditions for flourishing and my being able to respond to people being around me in that way.

This is the kind of thing that Marx thinks can only be produced by a species that has taken up the work of consciously transforming itself, so this is one reason why Marx is a proponent of revolution when oftentimes it is easy to read Marx and ask:

why is he a revolutionary? Why revolution? Why is it so important, this seizure of power? And even people might assume that revolution means violence and chaos, but for Marx one of the chief qualities of revolutionary activity is that it is human beings taking up the project of approaching their own historical development in a conscious and rational way. It's about organising with a view in mind of what a better society might be and how we might express and fully realise our capacity for sociality.

So whilst Marx does in fact argue for the abolition of morality, to suggest that this means we don't need moral thinking now or we don't need an ethical conception of human beings and human development now is premature. If we think of moral theory as a way of theorising a gap, a space between the world as it is and the world as it should be, then if we imagine that the world might be made as it should be – that we might actually be able to produce that better world and live in it – then that kind of role for morality disappears.

OT: Marx's critique of the standing view of morality has something to do with this human sense that you're talking about. The view that Marx is objecting to: the famous expositors of this kind of view – of the connection between morality and politics – being Locke and Rousseau. Both of these thinkers are concerned with characterising humans and humanity in some essential way and thus in turn, human activity. So, what do you think Marx understands by "human nature" and why does it lead to him down the path you just explained – towards thinking about revolution and labour rather than to the path which perhaps has more in common with moral and political philosophy, like say a social contract in a Lockean or Rousseauian sense.

VW: It's not actually that there is a gap *per se* between the world as it is and the world as it should be, where the world as it should be can only be known through abstract reflection, a sort of ideal conceptual reflection. Rather – and this goes to Marx's dialectic and his historical materialism – the world as it should be already exists *within* the current one. So we get these claims from Marx that communism is not an ideal to which reality must adjust itself but rather an already existing movement overcoming the current

state of things, and because it is an already existing movement overthrowing the current state of things, it is the kind of thing that we can know through empirical study.

ONE OF THE CHIEF QUALITIES OF REVOLUTIONARY ACTIVITY IS THAT IT IS HUMAN BEINGS TAKING UP THE PROJECT OF APPROACHING THEIR OWN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT IN A CONSCIOUS, RATIONAL WAY

So much of what's going on in Marx and Engels is based on attempting to understand historically how it is that working people have resisted capitalism, how is it that working people are resisting capitalism *now*? That is the primary object of study for developing a view about the nature of capitalism itself and the likelihood of ever producing a different society. It is something that he is taking up from the ongoing struggles of oppressed, poor, and working people battling against the ravages of capitalism and seeking their survival. And also finding, in practice *and* in theory, that the survival of the mass of humanity on the planet requires that they resist capitalism and produce a different kind of society that is based on the fulfilment of human needs.

OT: The concepts of revolution and labour involve a really specific way of thinking about human activity, self-directed human activity, how did we get there rather than the social contract?

VW: As Marx and Engels put it in *The Critique of German Ideology*, how human beings distinguish themselves from other non-human animals, is precisely in this capacity for transformation, for rational, conscious, goal-directed transformation of themselves, such that human beings are the product of their own creation. This materialist conception of human history *just* is the recognition that if you want to understand

something about human life you have to do history, you have to understand how it is that this thing has come to be as a result of human beings interacting with their natural and social world and that goes not just for things like capitalism itself but also for things that we might consider “natural ineradicable and essential” like human beings are greedy, human beings are competitive, human beings are racist or sexist. We come to see that actually there is a history for each of those things I just named and we can learn that history by asking the question: *how is it that human beings have produced themselves as this?* How is it that human beings have produced this feature of human social being.

MARXIST THEORY IN GENERAL, MARXISM IN GENERAL, IS AN ATTEMPT TO THEORISE THE WORLD FROM A RADICALLY HUMAN PERSPECTIVE

The project of revolutionary change is the project of passing out of our “prehistory.” Marx thinks we are still in the prehistory of producing our own reality, our own social world, but not knowing that that’s what we’re doing, relating to it as though it is just naturally given and not as something that we ourselves have brought into being and could bring into a different way of being, which is just revolution, just the species taking up its own existence as its creative project and choosing to realize itself in full.

OT: Can you comment on Marx’s discussion of the fetishism of commodities in *Capital*?

VW: It’s one of the places that I look when I shake my head in wonder – as I often do – at the prevalence of the view that Marx abandons the concept of alienation. Because I take it that the whole point of the story we are told in *Capital* about commodity fetishism is that we exist in a world where it looks as though the commodities do all kinds of things and it looks as though economic life is ticking along under its own power but it turns out that actually what we are seeing is our own alienated productivity, our own

alienated activity. This is precisely to suggest that the commodities are attributed with power that they don’t actually have but that is our *own* externalised power that has turned against us. We aren’t aware that this has happened because we produce in a way that reliably creates this kind of inverted relationship between us and our own products and productive activity.

OT: And maybe the flip side of the point you were making about the possibility of revolution, if we were to change society we might end up in a society where we’re *actually doing* what we are doing, where we *actually know* what corn is and what makes corn valuable, that would be part of what it is to *produce* corn on purpose, as opposed to what we have structurally now under capitalism where corn comes to mean this alien thing because of the circulation of commodities.

VW: Yes absolutely. One way to think of the problem of alienation or the problem of commodity fetishism just is that we are relating to the world in a way that’s mediated by these obscuring and alienating and abstract relations. This is the thing he thinks labour can get us to, to a state of constantly attending to the world while in an active interrelation with it, that’s how it is that we can have an accurate objective account of what and who is around us.

OT: Will you elaborate on the standpoint theoretical distinction between bourgeois morality or ethics, versus proletariat or communism morality, and the historicity of morality?

VW: Think about it in terms of standpoint: it is completely possible and coherent for a capitalist to adopt the standpoint of labour that Marx is describing; equally, it’s not only possible but quite common for working people to have a bourgeois perspective. As a question of standpoint it’s not about imputing a certain perspective to every actually existing member of the working class or every actually existing member of the capitalist class but rather imputing a perspective that belongs to the position of a class as a whole with respect to the work of producing and reproducing society. The idea that labour is supposed to be potentially emancipating and clarifying is precisely because it is the standpoint of the portion of society that is engaged in the everyday work of

actually doing the things that sustain it and make it the society that it is. This means this body of people could also potentially make it a better society.

OT: How do you work against or refute the anti-humanism of so much contemporary Marxism and critical theory?

VW: Marxist theory in general, *Marxism* in general, is an attempt to theorise the world from a radically human perspective. When we come back to that question of the knowability of the world or the limits and possibilities of science we can't escape our human subjectivity and that the only perspective we can have on the world is one that is shaped in all sorts of ways by the vicissitudes and idiosyncrasies of being human. I don't attempt to supersede or move beyond or transcend that *human* perspective on the world and on one and other.

I don't have an argument for why someone should care about what happens to humanity aside from the idea that I think that any of us who wish for human survival, none of that can happen without taking up *human* survival more generally as our aim. This is again, for Marx, what is distinctive for working people: that the masses of working, oppressed, poor, and exploited people on the globe cannot safeguard their own survival without working for human survival in general. But I do take human survival as an unqualified good as a human person and I really don't have anything to offer anyone that is confused about that other than a hug.

OT: Finally, what should we say about Marx's ethical views on emancipation?

VW: I think Marx is advocating for human beings to intervene in their own historical social development to emancipate themselves from shackles of their own making. Taking up such a project involves the unleashing and unfettering of their own creative potential, their own productive capacities. This is a project of freedom, what it is for human beings to develop a society so they can appear in reality in a way that corresponds with their essence as rationally productive beings who create their own conditions of existence.

Marx wrote open letters during the American Civil War, including to Abraham Lincoln and to the

American white working class as we call it, arguing for the importance of emancipation of chattel slaves. You see him talking about this issue in *The Jewish Question* as well, about the importance for supporting political emancipation as a larger project of supporting human emancipation generally.

MARX'S *CAPITAL*

PAUL NORTH IN CONVERSATION WITH ANDRÉS SAENZ DE SICILIA

Paul North is the Maurice Natanson Professor of German at Yale University. He writes and teaches on literature and other media, continental philosophy, literary and critical theory. He is editor (along with Paul Reitter) of a new translation of Marx's *Capital*.

Andrés Saenz de Sicilia is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Northeastern University London and a managing editor of *The Philosopher*. His book *Subsumption in Kant, Hegel and Marx: From the Critique of Reason to the Critique of Society* was published by Brill in 2024.

Andrés Saenz de Sicilia (ASdS): *Capital* is a rich and multi-faceted book, it's also a long and daunting book to get to grips with. Could you highlight some of the key ideas that we can find in the first volume of *Capital*?

Paul North (PN): People claim *Capital* for all sorts of discourses and that is partly because it has all those discourses in it. Marx is and is not a philosopher and *Capital* is and is not a book of philosophy. The different modes of discourse that are represented in this book – sociology, philosophy, history, literature, politics, polemics – are represented much more forcefully in the new translation. The main contribution of volume 1 of *Capital* is to give you a *theory of value* and to tell you why *value* is the controlling entity in the capitalist system. Since value is something made in the production process, volume 1 concentrates on that. The first four chapters lay out the special kind of thing that value is. Using a phenomenological procedure, the book starts with something called the *commodity*, which is a produced product meant for exchange and which carries with it not just what it can be used for, but also a ghostly object called *value*. Unlike other social systems, people living under the capital system are dealing in the object called value and a lot of their decision making is directed by the value part of things. E.g. I would want a banana not only for its taste and nutritiousness, but also because it has a certain amount of value. Value is the purpose and the kind of substance that everyone living in the capital system handles. It also has a need to increase itself. It takes different forms and puts different pressures on social groups, workers, and capitalists to conform to its needs, to move around the system and to produce more value. *Capital* is a book about how value is produced, how it runs our lives, but also about how a market society functions and why sociality in a market society is different from sociality in any other society. The deformations to society that value creates (re-)shape the way we relate to people, and affects all aspects of experience, natural or historical, even space and time are re-formed under the imperatives of value. All relations and operations that we have and undertake, including working, acquire a different form.

ASdS: What relation do we have to this text today, a text Marx wrote over a hundred-and-fifty years ago

when, in some ways at least, the world was a very different place? In what way can we approach this text from the present? How can we relate to it and what is the continuing relevance?

PN: In the first instance it makes us throw out the idea of history as a kind of progress. *Capital*, the book, doesn't get old, because, if you take Marx's analysis seriously, the system of capital freezes history. A lot of things change, but the fundamental laws stay the same. The way to look at the book is not to look at it as an artefact of a different time, but rather to situate it within the history of the capital system: it was being written at a time when capital had taken hold in the late 18th century in Europe, mainly in England, where Marx eventually ended up after having been exiled from Germany. A whole tradition of describing the capital system already existed: beginning in 1776 with Adam Smith and *The Wealth of Nations*, continuing with David Ricardo in the early 19th century. Marx arrived on the scene at an opportune time, when the first attempts to describe the system had to some degree demonstrated their lacks. What Marx saw were the lacks and the faults in the existing theories of the capital system. Before the system had taken over and become so totalising that you couldn't see it, Marx came in with a certain set of tools and made a definitive entry in the theory of capital.

ASds: Could you say something about the different versions and editions, the different attempts Marx made to write and rewrite *Capital*? In the introduction to volume 1 you write about *Capital* being unfinished, an incomplete book. Is it because of historical change being somehow necessarily incomplete, so that we have to be revising what Marx came up with in light of what we have experienced?

PN: That is *the* question. The book is actually not old, it is still very new because the capital system hasn't changed fundamentally. But that raises the question of how it does change, and Marx has a theory of how it changes. The *laws* don't change, but the *phenomena* change constantly, because capital needs to produce surplus-value whilst limits are constantly arising on that. We witness all sorts of new phenomena, whether it's tech, consumer electronics, or the rise of finance as the holder and processor of about sixty percent of the world economy. These are things that

Marx couldn't foresee in the 19th century. But they are predictable from the laws of capital in so far as capital is always looking for new ways to get around limits and increase surplus value. Those laws, Marx claims, have such necessity under capital that all phenomena change according to them. Changes that happen under the capital system are always in order to increase the production of surplus value, never to decrease it. That helps explain a lot of economic phenomena today.

THE MAIN CONTRIBUTION OF VOLUME 1 OF *CAPITAL* IS TO GIVE YOU A THEORY OF VALUE AND TO TELL YOU WHY VALUE IS THE CONTROLLING ENTITY IN THE CAPITALIST SYSTEM

ASds: How are language and style operating in *Capital* and how important are they to Marx's project? How did you approach this question in the new edition?

PN: There are a number of styles in the book, a number of voices, a number of Marxes. Paul Reitter gets a lot of them into English, which is very hard to do, this is one of the strengths of his new translation. To give an example, one of the characters trying to sell their commodities in the first four chapters is a priest who is trying to sell a bible in order to use the profits to buy schnapps. This is a joke that comes up over and over again in different forms and is part of the metaphoric comparing capital to religion. If you over-focus on dialectics you don't get to another critical tool, which is irony, or yet another critical tool, which is polemic. Or another critical tool which is misquoting. Marx sometimes makes his opponents' statements sound a little worse than they are, to make his point about how bad they are. So, you need to have a very ample ear to get the styles Marx uses to make capital and its excesses apparent.

ASds: To what extent are there philosophical aspects in *Capital*? Marx famously tried to distance himself and terminate the relationship he once had with

philosophy as he was moving into the mature phase of his thinking. But many see very deeply philosophical aspects in *Capital*. What might those aspects be, and is there a certain philosophical approach in the book?

PN: I think it is a very innovative way of doing philosophy but I am curious to know what you mean by philosophy.

IF YOU TAKE MARX'S ANALYSIS SERIOUSLY, THE SYSTEM OF CAPITAL FREEZES HISTORY. A LOT OF THINGS CHANGE, BUT THE FUNDAMENTAL LAWS STAY THE SAME

ASds: In a way that's part of the question itself because for many, Marx makes a break with philosophy and is doing something else, developing a new discipline, a new genre, maybe mixing up different disciplines and different approaches in a very unique way. Some claim Marx is still doing philosophy but perhaps reinventing what we think of as philosophy.

PN: If we put aside the politics of disciplines and really ask the question about what is philosophical about the book, Marx certainly is reinventing philosophy. For one thing, he is using his philosophical knowledge of Hegel, Spinoza, and Feuerbach to structure his argument. If we take the basic philosophical questions in modernity, for example, how does a subject contribute to knowledge, how much is our knowledge dependent on subjective aspects rather than objective aspects, Marx definitely has an answer to that. He thinks there is something beyond the objective and the subjective, namely the movement of history structuring social relations. He puts the movement of history at the centre of concern, rather than interpersonal relations or an individual subject's knowledge or the coherence of the idea of God, or even what we can know. The basic unit of everything is social and that determines what counts as an object or a subject. Marx is making a strong entry in the history

of philosophy, changing its object, adding an agent to history. The agent now is human society. Another way in which *Capital* is philosophical is that it shows how categories of understanding and action are generated. From one point of view, it is a categorial book. Value, sociality, surplus-value, and capital are categories. Marx is very concerned about the consistency of these categories. He is an inheritor, a direct student of German idealism, which is concerned with the relationship of freedom and necessity in human and natural history, and organizes reality into categories, somewhat paradoxically, to help bring that freedom to the fore. The German idealist project is that nature and human things are headed towards freedom, and philosophy should help them along the way with the right categories. *Capital* helps mainly inversely, by showing how you are trapped. If we accept this definition of philosophy, then Marx definitely is a philosopher.

ASds: There is a debated question around whether what *Capital* is depicting is a closed or an open system and there are big political and social consequences of how we answer that question. On the one hand Marx says that the goal of *Capital* is to reveal the economic laws of motion governing modern society, depicting a system of objective economic laws which act upon us whether we want or believe that or not. For some that lends itself to reading Marx as a kind of determinist, with things just taking place and we being the passive object of these forces. On the other hand, there is a sense that Marx is clearly trying to show that the laws of capital and the capitalist system aren't necessary or natural, that they can be changed and contested, so there is a possibility of resistance and rupture. How do you see this relationship between the objective and what you might call the subjective elements of capital and how were they approached in this new edition?

PN: Rumours of Marx's determinism are greatly exaggerated! The *Capital* project, which includes all three volumes, but also all the drafts and revisions, lays out the laws that govern the capital system inexorably. For Marx, history is not deterministic. He shows how the capitalist system is special in history in that it freezes history for its own purposes, stops its contingent movements through its necessitarian inner mechanism. Capital capitalizes, the system reproduces itself. So, it has a kind of drive to keep

its laws the same. Its necessity is made, not found, though this does not make it much easier to unmake it. That is to say: one of the necessities of capitalism is that everyone comes to depend on its continuation as is, in order to keep living, and it's hard to imagine overcoming it. It is not deterministic, but so much of the world depends on it now. Capitalism steadily increases dependence on it, and the more of the world that it absorbs into itself and the more of our activities that it subsumes into its processes, the harder it is for anyone or any group to get free.

ASds: The question of revolution is always looming in the background, but doesn't *Capital* as a book push that question to one side in order to proceed with the exposition of the system?

PN: Marx and Engels were both extremely active on the practical side, trying to make revolution a reality, although they went through a series of disappointments. In *Capital*, Marx lays bare our captivity, so we can see how much work it will take to imagine a way towards freedom.

ASds: How does the idea of capital freezing history connect with capital's incessant transformations developing ever greater contradictions which could eventually burst it apart? What is the relation of this developmental dynamic to the way capital freezes history and in relation to the viability of the revolution?

PN: He lays this out in the section on so-called original accumulation, a phrase he sometimes puts in quotes. Capitalism is not natural and history was not progressing toward it inexorably. It took a lot of force to bring capital about and there is no necessity that this should be the social form we all live under. Once capital takes over, it has an internal necessity that shapes all the possible changes and freezes history so that everything is pressured to change to favour capital. So Marx's argues. Revolutions and crises are two ways that history might break in and make capital's necessity molten again, contingent again. Proletarian revolutions seem, by the time Marx writes *Capital*, hard to carry through. Crises are interesting, but at least until now no crisis has been so deep or decisive that capital's laws couldn't make use of it to push capital in a slightly different direction, so that it could continue with its non-history.

ASds: Let us turn to a question about reading *Capital* from a global perspective: Marx focuses on England, takes English capitalism as the model and tries to extract from it the essential laws of the capitalist economy and the capitalist system. But it's been much debated, particularly amongst thinkers from the global south, whether the system Marx sets out in *Capital* is a system which captures the way that capitalism works around the world, particularly outside of Europe and North America. In *Capital* there is an insistence that the labour which is exploited by capital is for the most part "free" labour, which is not coerced but rather sold "willingly" by the owner of the labour power, the worker. There is much research showing that in many places around the world capital is accumulated without "free" labour, or with labour which sits somewhere in a grey zone between "free" and "unfree" labour. So how can *Capital* be read around the world and how fixed are the economic laws that Marx is describing, once capital departs from England, Europe, or North America?

IT TOOK A LOT OF FORCE TO BRING CAPITAL ABOUT AND THERE IS NO NECESSITY THAT THIS SHOULD BE THE SOCIAL FORM WE ALL LIVE UNDER

PN: A very important question asked even since Marx's time. Rosa Luxemburg famously said in the early 20th century that colonialism and imperialism are much more important to the project than Marx said explicitly, although Marx is clear that they are part of capital. Furthermore, the ways colonialism and imperialism are described from Europe are not the only or the best ways to describe them. With this in mind, *Capital* is perhaps best used, from whichever perspective you occupy, as a way to train yourself to look for the ways that the capital system does its deeds. All sorts of labour that is not free in the Marxian sense of freedom need to be included. Many phenomena crucial for the system, which are not included even in his Eurocentric view of capital—reproductive labour, for example—are given short shrift. Chattel

slavery in the Americas he saw as tied to capital and an engine of the capital system itself, even though he saw it as different and sometimes as secondary to “free” wage labour. It is important to remember that for Marx “free” labour, wage labour, is *compelled* labour. Compelled labour needs to be expanded to include every kind of compulsion, but the form doesn’t change the fundamental relation between capital and labour as laid out by Marx. Capitalists withhold the means of production so that unfree laborers are forced to submit to their demands if they want a means of living.

ASds: Can *Capital* – because of the foundational tie Marx posits between surplus-value and the exploitation of labour – be read as a philosophical reflection on ethics? Does a focus or emphasis on ethics show up in this new translation?

PN: I don’t think there is much of a focus on ethics in *Capital*, in the sense of good and bad decisions on interpersonal behaviour. *Capital* is what Marx calls an “automatic subject,” which subsumes the capitalist as well as the worker into its workings and makes them functions of the system. Capitalists may treat individual workers better or worse; capitalists may donate money to causes that benefit other classes, but they are nonetheless still exploitative. That is where their money comes from in the first place. This is another one of the strengths of the new translation. It makes available the peculiarity of value, and how what Marx calls “its ghostly objecthood” directs action. By and large, we are *not* directed by how *another* individual will experience our actions, or even by the way an object will satisfy our needs, *but by the way something can be exchanged on the market*.

ASds: So Marx is not trying to criticise the moral character of the capitalist but rather to explore the way in which worker and capitalist, once they slot into the system, have to fulfil the functions sanctioned by the system, so that the capacity for some kind of moral autonomy is extremely constrained by the way we enter into this system of commodity production and exchange.

PN: A capitalist who wants to pay their workers more has no choice but to lower wages, increase automation, or lay off workers, if the capitalist next door makes the same product more cheaply through the use of machines. The new translation makes it

clearer that capitalists are slaves of the system just as much as so-called free workers. Capitalists benefit more in terms of their individual wants and needs, but they have to make sure they get that surplus-value out of production, every single time.

SECTION 3:

GENERAL

HANNAH ARENDT AND EXILE

By Anna Argirò

Anna Argirò recently completed her PhD at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) at Kingston University London. Her dissertation develops a critical reworking of Hannah Arendt's concept of 'natality' as a critical tool to challenge traditional notions of autonomy, freedom, sovereignty, power, and revolution, emphasizing the relational nature of the human condition. She works mainly on continental philosophy, exile studies, feminist and decolonial theories.

In the face of the re-emergence of Trump's border-wall nationalism, Brexit, and increasingly strict European immigration policies, Hannah Arendt's reflections on human rights, statelessness, and her critique of sovereignty raise crucial questions: What could it mean to be a citizen in a political context where there is no nation-state? Can democracy, or more generally politics, be confined to the nation-state? Can we imagine an alternative? Is national affiliation the only framework through which rights can be guaranteed, or can we imagine a politics grounded in human plurality rather than sovereign exclusion?

Since her early biography of Rahel Levin-Varnhagen, a German-Jewish writer and intellectual who, between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, hosted one of the most important salons in Europe, Arendt reflects on what it means to live in a country as an outsider. Begun by Arendt when she was barely nineteen, interrupted eight years later, in 1933, when she was forced to leave Germany due to the Nazi regime's anti-Semitic laws that severely limited Jewish participation in German society, the project of this book took shape over many years, finally being published in English in 1957 under the title *Rahel Varnhagen: The Life of a Jewish Woman*. Through Rahel Varnhagen's biography, Arendt reflects on the existential significance of being a Jew in the hostile climate of Nazi Germany. Varnhagen's story is one of guilt, shame, self-denial, and of continuous attempts to cover up what she calls her 'infamous birth', through love, marriage or assimilation. Only in extremis does she recognize herself in her origin, intended as the starting point of everyone's life.

As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl suggests in her biography of Arendt, *Hannah Arendt: For Love of the World* (1982), the book on Rahel Varnhagen can be considered as an example of 'biography as autobiography.' For Arendt, it was not only a way to re-elaborate her own personal story, placing it at a distance, but also a laboratory, as it were, where her mature reflections on love, alienation from the world, and the solitude of the activity of thinking were coming to life. Arendt begins the reconstruction of Rahel Varnhagen's life and inner journey with the words that, according to her husband Karl August Varnhagen von Ense, she uttered on her deathbed:

WHAT a history! - A fugitive from Egypt and Palestine, here I am and find help, love, fostering in you people. With real rapture I think of these origins of mine and this whole nexus of destiny, through which the oldest memories of the human race stand by side with the latest developments. The greatest distances in time and space are bridged. The thing which all my life seemed to me the greatest shame, which was the misery and misfortune of my life - having been born a Jewess this I should on no account now wish to have missed.

This passage echoes Arendt's own words from her correspondence with Gershom Scholem: 'I have always regarded my Jewishness as one of the indisputable factual data of my life, and I have never had the wish to change or disclaim facts of this kind. There is such a thing as basic gratitude for everything that is as it is.' However, as Arendt herself remarks in her 1964 interview with Günter Gaus, the recognition of her origin was not an easy task: 'the word "Jew" never came up when I was a small child. I first met up with it through anti-Semitic remarks...from children on the street. After that, I was so to speak "enlightened".' Born in 1906, in Hannover, into a family of German Jews, Arendt spent her childhood in Königsberg, the city made famous by Immanuel Kant. She studied philosophy in Marburg, where she was a student of Martin Heidegger, and in Heidelberg, where she wrote her doctoral thesis on *Love and St. Augustine* (1929/1996) under the supervision of Karl Jaspers. In 1929, she married Günther Stern-Anders, another Heidegger student she first met in Marburg. Together they moved to Berlin. In 1933, after spending eight days in a Gestapo prison, Arendt fled from Berlin with her mother, Martha Arendt, and took refuge first in Prague, then in Paris where Stern had already moved. With the passage of the 1938 Nuremberg Laws, Arendt officially became stateless, a person with no political rights, and this would remain her status until 1951, when she obtained American citizenship. During these years, Arendt performed multiple jobs and worked for a Zionist association that helped Jewish refugees emigrate to Palestine.

Arendt's relation to Zionism would deserve another essay, but it is worth mentioning that she was introduced to it by Kurt Blumenfeld, who had been a family friend when she lived in Königsberg and whom

she met again in Heidelberg in 1926. Blumenfeld's arguments in defence of Zionism - particularly its nationalistic logic - never fully convinced Arendt, although she actually never disclaimed it. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1958) she would acutely denounce the two dynamics that have proven so deadly to Jews and to the world at large: the embracing of the nation-state system and imperialism. Far from solving the problem of statelessness, Arendt remarks, 'like virtually all other events of our century, the solution of the Jewish question merely produced a new category of refugees, the Arabs, thereby increasing the number of stateless and rightless by another 700,000 to 800,000 people.'

GUILT WAS NO LONGER A CONSEQUENCE OF SOME ACT COMMITTED, BUT RATHER WAS INTRINSICALLY RELATED TO THE VERY EXISTENCE OF SOME HUMAN BEINGS, THOSE UNWANTED AND UNDESIRABLE

While in Paris, Arendt and Stern befriended Stern's distant cousin, the literary critic and philosopher Walter Benjamin, who, in 1934, delivered his famous lecture 'The Author as Producer' at L'Institut pour l'étude du fascisme that Arendt attended. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl reports, Arendt also made acquaintance with a group of Russian political refugees thanks to the intercession of the novelist Nina Gourfinkel. This was the first time Arendt heard of the Ukrainian-French dancer, choreographer, and intellectual Rachel Bepaloff (1895-1949), a student of Lev Shestov of Jewish origin whose work deeply impressed her. The two will officially meet in American exile, in Mount Holyoke, in Massachusetts, where Bepaloff was teaching French literature and where Arendt gave a lecture on Kafka in August 1944.

Perhaps the most important Parisian encounter was that with Heinrich Blücher, a Marxist political

intellectual and activist whom Arendt married after her divorce from Stern. Despite Arendt's critical attitude toward Marxist thought, Blücher's activism greatly inspired her political thinking. On 5th May 1940, in anticipation of the German invasion of France, Arendt was detained by the French as an 'enemy alien' and sent to the Gurs internment camp. Thanks to the help of American officials, Arendt and her husband managed to obtain exit papers and visas. They were able to travel across Southern France to Spain, and then to Lisbon, where they set sail for New York. Later Arendt's mother joined them in New York.

AS SCHOLARS SUCH AS PRIMO LEVI HAVE STRESSED, THE PROJECT THAT LIES BEHIND EXTERMINATION CAMPS INFLECTS A WOUND ON THE DIGNITY NOT ONLY OF HUMAN LIFE, BUT ALSO, AND CRUCIALLY, OF DEATH

In 1941, Arendt and Blücher arrived in the United States. They gathered old and new friends and fellow refugees in their apartments in New York. Regular guests included Hans Jonas, Paul Tillich, Randall Jarrell, and Mary McCarthy, who would become one of Arendt's closest friends and editor of her last, unfinished manuscript, *The Life of the Mind*. McCarthy translated other writings such as both Rachel Bessaloff's and Simone Weil's essays on Homer's *Iliad*. In so doing, she connected the three as writers in exile.

These multiple experiences of exile provided Arendt with a special perspective from which to reflect on the topics of violence, statelessness, community, and human rights in the darkest times of the twentieth century. Arendt's multilingualism, her philosophical formation in Germany, her encounter with existentialism in interwar Paris (an encounter still largely underexplored in Arendt scholarship), and the

development of her subsequent political reflections in the American context made her a complex political thinker, not attached to a specific current of thought. Two years after emigrating to the US, Arendt explored the crushing conditions of exile in her essay "We Refugees," first published in 1943. Here, Arendt describes the existential anxiety of the Jews of Europe who fled their homes:

We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in this world. We lost our language, which means the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gesture, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives in the Polish ghettos and our best friends have been killed in concentration camps, and that means the rupture of our private lives [...] We were told to forget; and we forgot quicker than anybody ever could imagine [...] But sometimes I imagine that at least nightly we think of our dead or we remember the poems we once loved.

Arendt and the other European Jews who left their countries lost everything that was familiar to them, often ending up living out ghost-like existences in their host countries. Many émigrées attempted at finding footing in these countries via assimilation, largely pursued through an almost tragicomical patriotism.

Arendt unveils how these personal and social conditions can push one to the edge of political non-existence. Previously the word 'refugee' was synonymous with 'exiled', that is, someone who was expelled from the state for a crime, someone guilty for an action. In twentieth-century Europe, however, Jews were persecuted for being 'guilty of being' Jews. This shift in the meaning of refugee is of profound importance, both historically and for Arendt's thought. Guilt was no longer a consequence of some act committed, but rather was intrinsically related to the very existence of some human beings, those unwanted and undesirable. We may say that a bureaucratic contingency – being stateless – becomes an existential condition. A large number of Jews tried to escape this 'guilt of being', as well as the condition of being exiled from their countries and going through endless bureaucratic processes, by committing suicide. Two notable examples are Rachel Bessaloff and Walter Benjamin. The former took her life in 1949 in Mount Holyoke and the latter in 1940 in Spain after attempting to reach Portugal and set sail for New York, as Arendt and Blücher eventually did.

Building on Blumenfeld and Bernard Lazare, in “We Refugees” Arendt deconstructs the optimism of the ‘social parvenus’, those Jews who, to cope with the trauma of expulsion from their countries, perform difficult and often unsuccessful attempts to assimilate and integrate into the host nation. Instead, she makes her case for the ‘social pariahs’, the outsiders who do not deny their strangeness/foreignness, but actively claim it. In Arendt’s words:

There is something wrong with our optimism. There are those optimists among us who, having made a lot of optimistic speeches, go home and turn on the gas or make use of a skyscraper in a quite unexpected way [...] Suicides occur not only among the panic-stricken people in Berlin and Vienna, in Bucharest or Paris, but in New York and Los Angeles, in Buenos Aires and Montevideo.

The question of the ‘guilty of being’ is also inextricably related to the phenomenon of the camps, especially to extermination camps (*Vernichtungslager*), about which, however, Arendt did not know at that time: ‘We had very few reports at all from Poland, but we have been fairly well informed about German and French concentration camps.’ Arendt was one of the first twentieth-century philosophers reflecting on and writing about the phenomenon of the camps in *The Origins*. But the camp is a twentieth-century institution which is not born with German lagers or Russian gulags. As Arendt points out,

Not even concentration camps are an invention of totalitarian movements. They emerge for the first time during the Boer War, at the beginning of the century, and continued to be used in South Africa as well as India for ‘undesirable elements’; here, too, we first find the term ‘protective custody’ which was later adopted by the Third Reich. These camps correspond in many respects to the concentration camps at the beginning of totalitarian rule; they were used for ‘suspects’ whose offenses could not be proved and who could not be sentenced by ordinary process of law.

The specific peculiarity and aim of the camp is the elimination of those who are considered unwanted/undesirable, either by expulsion or annihilation. Like other detention institutions, such as prisons and madhouses, those who are interned in a camp are condemned to invisibility and immobility, a

perpetuation of the condition of the refugee, who lacks political/public visibility and whose right to travel is hindered by bureaucratic obstructions.

As scholars such as Primo Levi have stressed, the project that lies behind extermination camps inflicts a wound on the dignity not only of human life, but also, and crucially, of death. According to Michel Foucault’s definition in *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* (1963), in twentieth-century camps, we witness an exemplary shift in the configuration of political power, which begins to be understood as *bio-power* over bodies and lives. It is important to underline that there is a continuity between the different kinds of twentieth-century camps (labour camps, concentration camps, and extermination camps), and today’s forms of detainment such as migrant detention centres that may turn out to become as dangerous as ones in the past.

In “We Refugees”, Arendt ultimately provides a political perspective, which, in her view, most Jews at the time lacked. Twentieth-century refugees prefigure the symbol of the exiled persons in a globalized world. The refugees are aware of their exile. Arendt prophetically anticipates that uprootedness (*Entwurzelung*) and homelessness (*Heimatlosigkeit*) will become common existential and political conditions in the globalised world. These conditions can constitute a new political frame and paradigm:

Those few refugees who insist upon telling the truth, even to the point of “indecent,” get in exchange for their unpopularity one priceless advantage: history is no longer a closed book to them and politics is no longer the privilege of gentiles. They know that the outlawing of the Jewish people in Europe has been followed closely by the outlawing of most European nations. Refugees driven from country to country represent the vanguard of their peoples-if they keep their identity. For the first time Jewish history is not separate but tied up with that of all other nations. The comity of European peoples went to pieces when, and because, it allowed its weakest member to be excluded and persecuted.

Arendt extensively develops the questions of statelessness and human rights in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1958), her first major work, which, as Lyndsey Stonebridge points out in her recent biography of Arendt, *We Are Free to Change the World* (2024), was originally set to be titled *The Elements of Shame: Anti-Semitism-Imperialism-Racism*

and later *The Burden of Our Time: Anti-Semitism-Imperialism-Totalitarianism*. The final title, which gets rid of 'imperialism', 'racism' and 'Anti-Semitism', was suggested by her US publisher, with important consequences for how the book is still read, namely as a work primarily focused on twentieth-century European and Russian totalitarianisms. On the contrary, as Stonebridge remarks, what Arendt wanted to suggest is that 'the elements that eventually produced totalitarianism are endemic to most modern political systems.'

REFUGEES ARE A PRODUCT OF THE CONSTITUTION OF NATION-STATES; PEOPLE CONDEMNED TO NON-EXISTENCE BECAUSE THEY ARE OUTSIDE THE BORDERS OF A STATE

In *The Origins*, Arendt stresses the tension between nation-states and refugees. The starting point of her analysis is the fact that the world we live in is divided into nation-states. Unlike other interpreters, Arendt does not begin her analysis of the birth of the nation-state from the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which ended the Thirty Years' War and brought peace to the Roman Empire. This peace treaty is often considered as the origin of principles crucial to modern international relations, including the inviolability of borders and non-interference in the domestic affairs of sovereign states. Rather, she traces it back to the end of the nineteenth century/beginning of the twentieth century, namely the dissolution of the Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, and Russian empires. As these multiethnic empires disintegrated, newly formed nation-states attempted to define themselves through ethnic and cultural homogeneity, sparking violent conflicts and displacements—such as the population exchange between Greece and Turkey, the tensions in Transylvania between Hungary and Romania, and the Armenian genocide under the Turkish regime. What does not work is precisely the criterion of the nation,

because of its exclusionary nature based on the principle of sovereignty, shared characteristics of genealogy, history and culture, as well as ethnic homogeneity.

Against the sovereign nation-state, Arendt proposes an alternative rooted in federalism, particularly republican council systems that emerged spontaneously in revolutionary moments. In *On Revolution* (1963), Arendt sees these councils not as extensions of state power but as horizontal spaces for political action—networks that link diverse communities through laws and mutual recognition, rather than ethnic sameness or territorial sovereignty. It is the constitution of these nation-states, Arendt argues, that provoked the mass phenomenon of statelessness in the twentieth century. Refugees are a product of the constitution of nation-states; people condemned to non-existence because they are outside the borders of a state. To describe these people's condition, Arendt borrows the title the Hungarian-British author and journalist, Arthur Koestler, coined in his memoir-diary of that period: the *Scum of the Earth* (1941). The 'scum' represents what remains of the earth after this partition.

Those who are not defended by a state have no 'right to have rights', which for Arendt means the right to belong to and to participate in a political community, however provisional. The question of human rights arises in relation to twentieth-century refugees, people migrating without being protected by a nation. Indeed, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 10 December 1948 and the 1951 Geneva Convention that acknowledges 'refugee' as a legal category were issued a few years after the end of the Second World War.

In these works, Arendt invites us to consider the question of migration not from within the nation-state, but from the point of view of a globalized world, where we paradoxically witness the return of walls and a strengthening of the sovereignty principle. The tension between refugees/migrants and nation-states is far from being resolved. As Arendt has warned, this is a kind of politics that chooses to ignore the existence of human beings beyond national membership (on this topic see Donatella Di Cesare, *Resident Foreigners: A Philosophy of Migration*, 2020).

As already mentioned, the model Arendt eventually identifies as a possible alternative to the nation-state system is the federal council system that she saw exemplified in the Resistance and other democratic movements that emerged in revolutionary moments. While Arendt did not fully develop a blueprint for post-national democracy, her vision compels us to re-imagine politics from the standpoint of plurality rather than identity. Arendt's final call is thus not for nostalgia about lost homelands but for political innovation. In an age of renewed walls, digital surveillance, and offshore border regimes, her legacy challenges us to move beyond the false security of sovereignty, toward a global ethic rooted in plurality, mutual recognition, and shared responsibility. Only by breaking the monopoly of the nation-state over political life can we begin to build a world where rights are not the privilege of the affiliated, but the guarantee of the human.

NEOPLATONIC VOYAGING

by **Jonathan Egid**

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There are ideas and then there are Ideas. For Plato, Ideas or Forms are something rarified and ethereal: non-physical, absolute, and immutable. Residing ‘up there’, somewhere, outside of space and outside of time in the Realm of Ideas that was the only true reality, they bestowed a shadowy secondary reality upon the tangible things of this world. When we speak of the history or even the marketplace of ‘ideas’ today, we don’t quite mean what Plato did by Ideas, but we do nevertheless tend to hold onto the notion that ideas are something immaterial: the idea of liberty is something above and beyond its invocations in books and speeches, the idea of socialism cannot be reduced to its historical instantiations.

This can make it difficult to understand the movement of ideas through the world in the same way that we might understand the global trade in consumer goods like tea, or spices, or silk. Being ethereal, ideas are not easy to buy or sell. Neither are they consumed: an idea that is ‘used’ in the work of one philosopher is not thereby ‘used up’ – it remains for another philosopher to use this idea, and if an idea is used enough, it is not exhausted but rather transformed. This essay traces one such transformation: the journeying of Neoplatonism between Africa, Asia, and Europe. It aims to show one example of how ideas are subject to change in transit, how in the process of their transportation they are themselves transformed. In doing so, I hope to make a case of the significance of travel to philosophy. At its best, the journeying of philosophical ideas renews their vitality by transgressing linguistic, religious or intellectual-historical boundaries.

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Neoplatonism, sometimes known as ‘late Platonism’, is characterised by its focus on the primacy of *nous* – often translated as ‘thought’ or ‘intellect’ – over the physical world, and the idea that all of reality in its inexhaustible diversity must somehow proceed from this single, immaterial principle. Everything in the world is to be understood and explained in terms of this indivisible and divine cause, which Neoplatonists refer to variously as ‘the First’, ‘the One’, or ‘the Good’. The One stands atop a ‘hierarchy of being’ in which the less real, more tangible things of this world sit lower than the abstract principles from which

they ultimately derive. But how? The fundamental problem faced by Neoplatonist philosophers was to explain how the diversity and multiplicity that characterises our experience of reality arises from a singular principle: how does a divine mind produce an imperfect physical world? How does the one produce the many?

According to the *Enneads* of Plotinus, the greatest classical Neoplatonist, it is by a process of ‘emanation’. Emanation has been described as ‘the process of spillage from the One’, of how the multiplicity of reality ‘pours out’ of the One without ever diminishing or even changing its timeless nature. For Plotinus, there are three *hypostases* (or layers) of emanation: first is *nous*, the realm of ideas; second the soul, which is divided into the ‘world soul’ that bridges the sensible and the supersensible worlds, and the ‘individual soul’ that animates each of our bodies; third the material world, the ‘lowest’ aspect of reality that Plotinus sees as the antithesis of the true reality of the One.

In the *Enneads* – known to much of posterity through the misnomer of *Theology of Aristotle* – and in the works of his student Porphyry, this account of the ‘descent’ of reality through emanation by the One, through *nous*, to the soul, all the way down to the world of the senses is developed into an incredibly rich and intricate philosophical system, full of explanatory power and exceedingly rich in imagery and metaphor. In insisting on the fundamentality of the intellect, and deriving material reality from it, Neoplatonism is a kind of idealism. It is a form of philosophy often described as ‘mystical’ or ‘religious’, and, as we will see on the coming journey, it is difficult to disentangle the religious from the mystical from the philosophical. They are such close travelling companions.

Although, as the name suggests, Neoplatonism’s core ideas reach back further into Greek philosophy and religion, to Plato and beyond, the system itself as we understand it today traces its origins to the writings of Plotinus and his student Porphyry in third century AD Alexandria. Neoplatonism itself can be understood as something of a grand synthesis of all Greek philosophy up until that point – combining elements of Plato, Aristotle, and the pre-Socratics, as well as elements of Hellenic culture that had often been seen as marginal to the philosophical enterprise, such as religion and

poetry. As Christian Wildberg has put it, Neoplatonists “absorbed, appropriated, and creatively harmonized almost the entire Hellenic tradition of philosophy, religion, and even literature”.

The Alexandria of Plotinus and Porphyry was one of the great cities of the world and one of the most fertile intellectual environments of all time, in large part owing to its position between the Hellenic and Abrahamic worlds. In the first century AD, Philo of Alexandria effectively created Jewish philosophy, including a remarkable work which synthesised Jewish religion and Greek philosophy by means of an allegorical reinterpretation of the Book of Genesis. As he writes in his *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis 2*:

The story of the creation of Eve, we are told, is not meant to be taken literally. It is a “Myth,” showing forth the origin of Sense-perception, which becomes active when Mind is asleep (Gen. ii. 21). The bringing of Woman to Man is the introduction of Sense-perception to Mind, which hails it as its own.

THE FUNDAMENTAL PROBLEM FACED BY NEOPLATONIST PHILOSOPHERS WAS TO EXPLAIN HOW THE DIVERSITY AND MULTIPLICITY THAT CHARACTERISES OUR EXPERIENCE OF REALITY ARISES FROM A SINGULAR PRINCIPLE

This creative synthesis of Abrahamic faith and Greek philosophy was to provide a blueprint to a millennium of philosophers from late antique Ethiopia to mediaeval Persia and Renaissance Florence.

By the time Plotinus and his student Porphyry were active in Alexandria, it was not Judaism but Christianity that offered the major challenge to the traditional Hellenic worldview. Porphyry,

who may have been born a Christian, was an indefatigable opponent of the young religion, writing a work entitled *Against the Christians* and promoting traditional polytheistic worship. Nevertheless, there was a great irony in store for both sides. Over the coming centuries, Christianity was to become 'Neoplatonised', and Neoplatonism was to spread to a significant extent by means of Christian expansion. Early church fathers across the Mediterranean were educated in an intellectual world shaped by Neoplatonism: Augustine of Hippo was deeply immersed in the study of Plotinus and Porphyry as a young man, and Origen may even have been taught by the same teacher as Plotinus in Alexandria. Indeed, the very language in which Christian theologians couched their discussions of transubstantiation, the nature of the Trinity, and the question of the divinity of Christ, drew heavily on the conceptual vocabulary of Neoplatonism.

AT ITS BEST, THE JOURNEYING OF PHILOSOPHICAL IDEAS RENEWS THEIR VITALITY BY TRANSGRESSING LINGUISTIC, RELIGIOUS OR INTELLECTUAL-HISTORICAL BOUNDARIES

Alexandria lies at one of the many mouths of the Nile, where the longest river in the world empties into the Mediterranean Sea. The question of its source was a great mystery to ancient writers, and generations of European adventurers through the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries ventured to find it. It is impossible to traverse the Nile, owing to the great cataracts that prevent a prospective traveller from ascending from the desert-fringed lowlands of the Nile valley in Egypt and Sudan up into steep, lush canyons of the Ethiopian highlands, where the Blue Nile finds its source in a marsh close to Lake Tana.

Neoplatonic ideas arrived here with Christianity. The missionaries traditionally known as the 'Nine

Saints' fled persecution in the Levant, enduring the long, suffocatingly hot journey south along the Red Sea coast, arriving in the coastal cities of the Aksumite empire that spanned modern day Eritrea and northern Ethiopia. The empire converted to Christianity in the fourth century AD, while debates between Christians and Neoplatonists were still ongoing in Alexandria. Neoplatonic terminology infiltrated G'z, the language of the Aksumites and the language of Ethiopian Christianity to this day, initially through the translation of Christian scripture. Greek-speaking Christians had long found it useful to use the Neoplatonic term *hypostasis* – often translated in philosophical contexts as 'substance' or 'essence' – to mean 'person' (as in the three persons of the Trinity), and this term was translated into G'z as *bähri* lit. 'pearl', suggesting the 'essence', 'nature' or 'character' of a thing that underlies change. This notion was of crucial importance to Ethiopian and Egyptian 'monophysite' Christians who profess (against Eastern Orthodox and Catholic and Protestant churches) that the Human and Divine *physis* ('natures') of Christ are married into one *hypostasis* "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation" (The Chalcedonian Creed).

In the centuries after conversion to Christianity, Aksumite armies would burst across the Red Sea into South Arabia, conquering large parts of Yemen. But it was a journey in the opposite direction, from the city of Medina to Aksum that would have important consequences for the global journey of Neoplatonism.

In the early seventh century, the followers of Mohamed sought refuge with the *Nejashi* (an Arabic interpretation of the G'z *negus*), the Aksumite emperor, who offered them shelter and refused to hand them over to the Quraysh tribe that pursued them. Having survived as guests of the *Nejashi*, the followers of Mohamed embarked on one of the most daring and impressive campaigns of conquest in human history, expanding the Islamic realms from Arabia to Morocco and Al-Andalus in the West to Khorasan in the East. In only one hundred years, Arabic had gone from a language written very rarely, to express the poetry of a nomadic people,

to one of the great cultured and literary languages of the world. From the eighth century, Abbasid elites engaged in a massive project of translating scientific and philosophical materials, a project which was so successful that by the tenth century an educated resident of Baghdad could read almost all surviving works of Aristotle in Arabic.

Greek texts flooded into Arabic, bringing with them a huge host of words (one example would be *hāyulā* from Greek *hyle*, which remains a term for ‘matter’, as well as the term *falsafa* itself from *philosophia*). Many philosopher-translators would transcribe or calque significant technical terms, sometimes providing an Arabic near-equivalent to make the meaning clear. And perhaps the most abidingly important influence on the contours not only of Arabic-language philosophy, but Islamic theology in general, was Neoplatonism.

Almost all the major figures of philosophy in the Islamic world wrestled with Neoplatonism in some way or other. Al-Kindi, often seen as the father of Islamic philosophy was perhaps the first to seriously engage Neoplatonism as part of his great scheme of harmonising Greek science with Islam. But it is in the system of Ibn Sina, the greatest of all Islamic philosophers, indeed the greatest philosopher of the Middle Ages, that this process achieves its fullest articulation. Ibn Sina adapted the Neoplatonic theory of emanation by making a distinction between God and the Creation, so as to avoid the tendency of Neoplatonists towards pantheism – the idea that God and nature are one and the same. His picture of emanation is also far more complex: unlike Plotinus, he has not one intellect or *nous* but ten. The First Intellect, the *al-‘aql al-awwal*, is like God/The One, immaterial and undivided, but unlike God is contingent, existing only because God brought it into being. From this first intellect is derived a second intellect, down to the tenth, each of which is associated with a heavenly body.

There were also differences between those who rejected Neoplatonism. The great Andalusian commentator on Aristotle, Ibn Rushd, thought Neoplatonism philosophically erroneous and much inferior to his favoured Aristotelian system, whereas his more theologically orthodox near-contemporary al-Ghazali opposed Neoplatonism because he opposed philosophy quite generally. When al-Ghazali attacked

Neoplatonism in his *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, Ibn Rushd responded to this critique in his *Incoherence of the Incoherence*.

BUT WHILE HE WAS A POLITICAL FAILURE, DARA SHUKOH WAS A PATRON OF AN ASTOUNDING INTELLECTUAL SUCCESS, ONE OF THE GREATEST INGATHERINGS OF PHILOSOPHICAL TRAVELLERS IN HUMAN HISTORY

Within this tradition of Islamic philosophy, ideas travelled over a huge area: from Ibn Rushd and Al-Arabi in modern-day Spain at the Western edge of the Islamic world, to Ibn Sina in central Asia. A second trajectory would take it further still. The Ismai’lis were perhaps the most thoroughgoing Neoplatonists in mainstream Islam, holding onto a strong form of ‘apophatic’ theology, denying all ‘positive’ ascriptions of qualities to God (for to attribute qualities to God is to claim to know him somehow, impinging on his transcendence) in favour of promoting what they saw as a more defensible ‘negative’ description – God is *not* in time or space, *not* ignorant, *not* limited in any way. This approach to understanding the divine emphasises the total oneness of God, and his total transcendence, and explains the variety of God’s creation in terms of the by-now familiar notion of emanation from the One. Persecuted for their radical theological-philosophical views, various Ismai’li communities fled in various directions: some to the traditional home of Neoplatonism in Alexandria, others to Yemen, and yet others to Western India. Here they would meet with currents of Neoplatonically-inspired Sufi mysticism that would produce one of the most remarkable cross-cultural encounters of the early modern world.

In 1656, a large number of Sanskrit scholars gathered together in Varanasi on the Ganges, urgently summoned by the prince Dara Shukoh, heir to the Mughal throne. Dara Shukoh demanded from them a Persian translation of the Upanishads, a feat which the scholars completed in the near-miraculous timespan of just six months. This speed pleased Dara Shukoh. He was determined to find proof for the unity of all religions, or rather, proof that all religions expressed the same truths, truths perfectly expressed only in Islam. He was not to be disappointed. When the translations were complete, he composed an introduction to this collection of Upanishadic writings that he would title the *Sirr-i akbar*, “The Great Secret,” proclaiming that he had discovered the Upanishads to be the textual source of monotheism (*tawhid*) itself.

THE ISLAMIC AND ETHIOPIAN ENGAGEMENT WITH NEOPLATONISM THOUGHT WAS NOT AN ADOPTION BUT RATHER A CREATIVE REWORKING OF THESE FORMERLY FOREIGN IDEAS

His philosophical and religious boldness was to be his downfall. Just months later, his brother Aurangzeb deposed Dara Shukoh and had him arrested on charges of heresy and apostasy from Islam. These charges cited some of the more provocative claims he made in his introduction to *Sirr-i akbar*. He was executed on the ninth of September, while his conservative and military-minded brother went on to rule for almost fifty years, making the Mughal Empire into the world’s largest economy and expanding its borders to their largest extent.

But while he was a political failure, Dara Shukoh was a patron of an astounding intellectual success, one of the greatest ingatherings of philosophical travellers in human history. Dara Shukoh’s personal ‘guru’ was

a Sufi named Sarmad Kashani of Armenian-Jewish origin, who studied with the greatest of the post-Avicennan Islamic philosophers Mullah Sadra and translated the Torah into Persian. Sarmad claimed in his poetry to be neither Jewish, nor Muslim nor Hindu, instead preaching a form of perennialism – the idea that all religions express the same original and unchanging truth – an idea that would cost the young heir to the Mughal throne his head.

Dara Shukoh had an impressive range of religious and philosophical traditions upon which to draw. In addition to Muslim Sufis and Hindu pandits, Christian Jesuits were present at the royal court, at this stage already part of a global network of philosophical transmission and exchange; we find them mentioned in works of philosophy by seventeenth century Ethiopian scholars, engaged in discussions with Japanese philosophers, and everywhere trying to convince (usually unsuccessfully) their interlocutors using the logical arsenal of late-scholastic philosophy.

This was by no means the only European intellectual tradition represented at the Mughal court. Serving as a physician at the court was one François Bernier, a French traveller and an ardent follower of the atomist thinker Pierre Gassendi. Bernier provided not only cutting-edge medical treatment but the very latest in the ‘new science’ being developed by Gassendi, Descartes, and others in Western Europe. Indeed, one of his hobbies, between providing cures to the courtiers and debating metaphysics with the pandits, was translating Descartes. At the court of the Mughal emperor, arguably the most powerful man on the planet, a rich, already-globalised philosophical discussion was underway in which Sufi-transmitted Neoplatonic ideas mingled with the latest developments in Western European anatomy and philosophy, and traditional Catholic theology encountered Hindu philosophy.

In a fascinating paper, Jonardon Ganeri has suggested that in staging the encounter between Sufi Islam and the Hinduism of the Upanishads, “what Dārā has done, in effect, is to discover within Sufism the archaic remnants of another migration [...] it is possible that the translation of the Upanishads into Persian in 1657 was not the first time that they journeyed on an easterly wind.”

It has often been noted that Plotinus, the great founder of Neoplatonism, joined the military expedition of Emperor Gordian III to Persia in 243AD, supposedly out of an interest in studying Indian philosophy. It is an unfortunate gap in the scholarly record that we have no real idea how much of Indian philosophy Plotinus was able to learn, either in Egypt or on campaign in the East. Nevertheless, many scholars have noted striking similarities between the ideas of the Upanishads and the central tenets of Neoplatonism. Dara Shukoh himself describes the motif of the ascent and descent of souls, with the 'descent' of the souls describing the movement of emanation from The One, through Nous ('intellect'), to Psyche ('soul'), all the way down to the world of the senses, and the 'ascent' describing the movement in the opposite direction back up in a process of 'contemplation'.

Is it possible that in staging this dialogue between Islam and Hinduism, between the teachings of the Upanishads and of the Sufis, Dārā Shukoh had somehow perceived an ancient genetic link between the two systems? Was something in the core of Neoplatonic philosophy finding itself drawn back to its ultimate historical origins? If it was, then, as Jonardon Ganeri remarks, "how appropriate for him to name his comparative masterpiece after the place in Khartum where two tributaries of the Nile rejoin: *majma-ul-bahrain*, 'the meeting-place of the two waters.'" Our journey, from Egypt to Ethiopia, Iraq, central Asia and India, has come full circle.

What are we to learn from this journey? First that *ideas travel*. Indeed they travel very widely, and often very quickly. Neoplatonism was forming the vocabulary of Ethiopian Christianity less than a century after its invention, and an intellectual at the court of Dara Shukoh could, before the end of the seventeenth century, read Descartes, the Upanishads, and Thomas Aquinas. The second is that *ideas travel by quite ordinary means*, accompanying missionaries, doctors, armies, rolled up in scrolls or tucked away in codices that can be bought and sold, condemned or exalted, copied, burnt or left to rot. The point is obvious, but

we forget it nevertheless. Third, *ideas are transformed in transit*. The Islamic and Ethiopian engagement with Neoplatonism thought was not an adoption but rather a creative reworking of these formerly foreign ideas; not appropriation but reinterpretation. Nobody has a greater claim to these ideas simply by virtue of belonging to a particular national or linguistic culture; the legacy of Neoplatonism belongs to those who have kept it vital over the past centuries: to the anonymous Ethiopian scribes, to al-Kindi and Ibn Sina, to the Dārā Shukoh and to his Armenian-Jewish Sufi master. In fact, it belongs to anyone who in translating, challenging and wrestling with these ideas lend to them a new life and energy.

THE UNNATURAL SIDE OF NATURE

by **Rafael Holmberg**

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When we think of nature, it seems clear that we think of something self-evident and easily defined, such as biological processes, geology, physical particles, DNA structures – in other words, the material reality of the world that is independent of any subjective interpretation, independent of any moral or ethical valuation, or, in short, of any ‘cultural’ perspective. When we think of nature, in other words, it is easy to insist on the definition of nature provided by the early French sociologist Émile Durkheim: *nature is what is left behind or overcome in order to achieve civilisation and culture*. But a second glance suggests a precariousness in this neat distinction between the natural world and its cultural counterpart. Epigenetics, for example, shows us that these same natural DNA structures find their expression by depending on cultural contexts, and that certain cultural factors, in turn, influence and arrange the ‘natural’ structure of DNA. The same disturbance in the line separating culture and nature emerges where we think of recent neuropsychological work on frontal lobe functioning. Frontal lobe neurons are not independent of any subjective or human functions, but rather *exist* only in accordance with these cultural functions: the structures of these neurons are radically dependent on external, social priorities such as attention, watching for social cues, or mediating interpersonal relationships. If we remove these purely cultural contexts, we also simultaneously lose their natural (neuronal or biological) counterpart, where neurons are structured *only* insofar as they are applied to cultural requirements.

Psychology as a discipline has profited from this malleability between what we consider cultural and what we consider natural. The ‘mind’, or at least the concept of the mind, has undergone a breathtaking acrobatic shift in terms of the methods by which we appreciate it today. The mind was, in earlier rationalist and idealist contexts, a transcendent, if not divine, function. It was seen as the dimension of human existence which endlessly avoided being reduced to concrete, natural processes. And yet the emergence of an empirical approach to the mind in the 20th century via scientific psychology has definitively inverted this vision of the mind as non-natural: with the development of neuroscience and biopsychology, the mind is viewed as the natural product of a complex neuronal system, the ‘conscious’ experience of a homeostatic biological system. However, with the simultaneous



Nordlys i Bossekop den 6te Januar 1839.

birth of psychoanalysis, the mind and its unconscious dimension was once again seen to be irreducible to its natural functioning, but was instead forced by Freud to reflect a contradictory and repressive origin of human behaviour, which he claimed could only be attributed to the 'discontent' produced by culture. Even quantum physics makes the unnerving and paradoxical claim that (natural) subatomic particles are re-structured by perspective, or by the way in which they are measured.

In these instances, nature appears 'open' to culture, or to make sense only insofar as it is received and formatted according to a uniquely human perspective. We are right to insist on natural processes, on a reality that is independent of any cultural form of expression. And yet, as I will argue, we cannot ignore the tendency by which these same natural processes fail to be coherently distinguished from their opposite, cultural

side. Whatever nature is, it certainly has a volatile tendency. As the literary critic Terry Eagleton has argued, this instability is a central feature of what we call culture:

Culture is a functionally variable term, in the sense that what may be cultural in one context may not be so in another. [...] Drinking alcohol is a cultural affair, but it would cease to be so if it was the only way of quenching an intolerable thirst. Survivors of an air crash in some remote terrain who break open the drinks locker are not having a party. [...] You may wear a head-dress in Qatar as a badge of your cultural identity, but also to avoid getting sunstroke.

Eagleton is very right to point out that cultural practices often toe the line between natural and unnatural, although he does not make the corollary

argument (which I am making) that *nature itself* usually fails to be registered as natural. It is not that there is no such thing as nature – psychology, physics, geology, chemistry, biology etc. all point towards the definitive existence of something outside of culture, to the existence of a natural world. Rather, what I would like to focus on is our persistent tendency to misunderstand what is truly meant by the natural, or rather that nature frequently expresses itself in a decisively cultural sense.

NATURE IS ALWAYS MARKED WITH THE CULTURAL PERSPECTIVE FROM WHICH WE IMAGINE IT TO BE SEPARATE

This volatility of nature becomes even more apparent if we think of something like homosexuality. As is very well known, homosexuality was until recently considered deeply unnatural, even by the American Psychological Association. It was seen as a deviation from the biological function of sexuality, which was nothing more than the function of reproduction. And yet psychological research from the previous decades (research today avowed by the APA) suggests the inverse: homosexuality is unquestionably natural, entirely accountable for by anatomical and neurochemical variations in brain functioning. We are therefore confronted with two confident and opposing assertions on the ‘natural’ dimension of sexuality: as serving human reproduction or as neuro-anatomically justified. In this sense, homosexuality is rendered at one and the same time natural and unnatural. (It is worth noting that with the dawn of psychoanalysis, *all* sexuality became viewed as perverse and divorced from nature.)

The same problem of what we consider to be natural can be transposed onto the sociological level with the question of intergroup mixing, i.e. the mixing of racially or culturally distinct groups of people. From a nationalistic viewpoint, the mixing of social and cultural groups is inherently unnatural – it corrupts the independent development of a particular identity and interrupts the natural development

of a race. From an evolutionary perspective, on the other hand, intergroup mixing produced for a broad genetic exchange that allowed us to adapt to natural constraints. In other words, from this perspective the same process of intergroup mixing is deeply natural.

These examples merely intend to suggest a certain problem that emerges whenever we categorise something as natural or unnatural: something can appear to be both natural and unnatural. What I suggest in this essay is that there is an unavoidable contingency to the idea of nature, or that nature is always marked with the cultural perspective from which we imagine it to be separate. In other words, and to return to my opening sentence, when we think of nature, it is hard to admit that we are *truly* thinking of nature itself.

But this is not a new problem. For centuries, philosophers have struggled with what to do about nature, and whether nature ‘by itself’ (without the mediation of how culture relates to nature) carries any meaning at all for us. It is worth pointing to some of these forms of philosophical ambivalence on the topic of nature in order to better understand the historical difficulty with which nature has been juxtaposed to culture.

In his *Aesthetics*, Hegel observes that when artistic creations (most frequently poetry) refer to nature, it is an entirely empty and self-defeating reference. Aesthetic pursuits, for Hegel, are a method for Spirit (the collective agency or self-consciousness of culture) to form a relation to itself, often by unusual, experimental, and sometimes even self-alienating creations. The main point is that art is the expression of culture’s relation to itself, as well as an expression of what it fails to or succeeds in recognising about itself. Nature, on the other hand, is the non-subjective state from which Spirit and culture emerge, and from which they inevitably become separated. Hegel’s critique of poetic references to nature is rooted in the idea that whilst nature indeed *exists*, the nature which Spirit speaks of is already coloured by the intention which Spirit attributes to it. The nature present in aesthetics is not nature by itself – nor can it ever be a pure form of nature – because it is tainted



Fig. 233.—DOUBLE-ARCHED AURORA WITH STREAMERS.

by a cultural perspective that *by definition* can only exist insofar as it has removed itself from any natural origin.

Other prominent figures of 19th century philosophy would share a similar problematic relation to the idea of nature. F. H. Bradley, for example, made the bold argument that nature is a mere appearance, and not fundamentally real. As provocative as this sounds, Bradley's argument was similar to the one I made above, resting on the fact that nature is very malleable in its definition, and that it inevitably comes to depend on the political or aesthetic premises that define what we mean by nature. Hegel's contemporary, Schelling, made the even more controversial argument that nature *only* exists insofar as it can be expressed for human subjectivity to reason about it – without our perspective, nature itself disappears.

For Schopenhauer, the reality behind appearances – the Kantian thing-in-itself – is rendered as the

human will or drive. With this trade-off (from inaccessible noumena to an identifiable, nameable quality of the will), even the thing *behind* human or subjective appearances is turned into a subjectively defined feature: our will or drive. In other words, the absolute exteriority of the natural world, from which the human perspective is barred, gets reappropriated into the will of humanity itself. Schopenhauer's greatest follower and greatest critic, Nietzsche, would make a similar trade-off. Not only in *Human, All Too Human*, but in *The Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche depicts an inherently constructed – i.e. culturally formatted – aspect to our natural origins, or to the remaining instincts of these origins. For example, the instincts for survival, for status, or for domination take on a very unusual form in advanced industrial societies: survival is not merely biological or natural reproduction, but the preservation of a cultural legacy. Domination is not merely the biological notion of physical domination to attract a partner,

but ideological and cultural domination by influence rather than direct physical confrontation. In other words, the Nietzschean use of natural instinct becomes deeply fettered to modern cultural concerns. With these philosophers, it seems that the inner essence of nature is inescapably cultural.

NATURE MAY PRECEDE CULTURE, BUT THIS CERTAINLY DOES NOT GUARANTEE THAT WE WILL REFLECT ON IT NEUTRALLY

The difficulty of separating between the natural and the cultural has not simplified as we move into 21st century philosophy, as evidenced by the recent intervention of “speculative realism”. Some proponents of this movement, such as Graham Harman, make a seemingly straightforward argument that we have failed to consider natural objects for themselves, outside of subjective relations. Harman’s argument, put briefly, is that we have limited the essence and experience of objects to *our* (the subject’s) experience of these objects, and in so doing have obscured the fact that objects also relate to *other* objects by revealing and concealing an inexhaustible set of properties: in relation to a book, the table is an obstacle preventing it from falling to the floor, yet in relation to a fire, a book is a flammable object. The properties of the book are very differently expressed in relation to the table compared to the fire. No relations between natural objects ever exhaust the multiple possible meanings that any one object can have to another object. Other proponents of speculative realism, most notoriously Quentin Meillassoux, make a more critical accusation: we refuse to consider *being* without the additional factor of *thinking*. Put in more convenient terms, philosophy since Kant has, according to Meillassoux, insisted on correlating natural existence with our subjective *representation* of this existence, and has thereby denied natural existence any autonomy outside of culture. With Meillassoux’s claim, philosophy launches a scathing

inquisition into itself, suggesting that we have failed to think about nature in any genuine sense for the last 250 years.

But, as already noted, the question is not about whether nature exists outside of human or cultural reception. Rather, the question is about the difficulties that arise *once* culture itself emerges. It would be very hard to deny that there is such a thing as nature or natural processes. Even if we were to suggest that a tree which falls when nobody is around *did not* make a sound, it would be odd to deny that there was a tree or even a forest in the first place. Natural objects exist even if we are not there to observe them. The problem that biology, physics, and biopsychology instead present us with is that human representation and culture infuses nature with what it sees in it. In other words, nature is no longer *just* nature once it is contemplated from the cultural perspective. Nature may precede culture, but this certainly does not guarantee that we will reflect on it neutrally. These various examples mainly serve to suggest a simple point: that philosophy has for a long time either covertly or overtly struggled with neatly separating the natural from the cultural. Whatever we consider the obverse of culture – nature, as I am using it here following a long philosophical tradition – is seemingly self-contradictory. Nature indeed exists, but by all measures – from speculative idealism to neurobiology – it appears deeply unstable, and is permitted to be known by culture only by being simultaneously obscured.

Direct philosophical concerns aside, the most pressing aspect of this very strange status of nature is the climate crisis. Most of us are more than aware of the desperate ecological state inflamed by human industry, and of the global climate destruction of which we are only beginning to see the first effects. Few climate scientists doubt that freak weather occurrences including storms, floodings, hurricanes, droughts, or forest fires are above all natural, and very *real*, events. The climate crisis is the definitive statement *against* any cultural relativism – it would be almost impossible to suggest that this crisis points towards nothing more than a problem within culture. Put simply, the ecological disaster over the horizon is certainly a *real* problem. If we were to ask a climate

scientist whether this crisis really is a crisis relating to nature, we would receive a resounding *yes*.

But this is not an essay on climate science. It is rather a reflection on the apparent ineffectiveness of climate science in the public sphere. Public and popular behaviour rarely, if ever, reflects the genuinely dire state of the ecological problem expressed by climate scientists. My argument is that this ineffectiveness cannot be separated from the inconsistency with which we treat the idea of nature itself. We are unable to apprehend nature by itself without injecting it with an unnatural factor, or without an aspect of cultural relativising. What I am concerned with is not so much the scientific knowledge of the climate catastrophe, but the persistent ‘culturation’ of this natural knowledge.

As a recent example of this, we need only look at the recent wildfires in Los Angeles. Prior to these, most natural disasters had a geographical and economic component: they primarily affected third-world countries and poorer communities. In other words, they upheld Niall Fergusson’s claim in his 2021 book, *Doom: The Politics of Catastrophe*, that any natural disaster is at the same time an economic disaster, insofar as it takes an economically unstable network to allow natural incidents to grow to truly disastrous proportions. With the LA wildfires, however, an exception arose. The people afflicted were elites of American culture: actors, directors, and millionaires, who seemed exempt from the cultural and economic instability which seems to fuel ecological catastrophes. We are reminded of the almost (yet unintentionally) satirical remark of one Sky News reporter during the Valencia floodings of late-2024: “these things don’t usually happen here”. In other words, an arrogance persisted that natural disasters do not happen in economically prosperous areas.

Even though it seemed, with the LA fires, that nature and the reality of the climate crisis was making itself clear, the same prejudice analysed by centuries of philosophy reared its head: this natural disaster was reconstructed as a problem of culture. Rather than recognising a natural ecological threat, Republicans almost unanimously blamed Democratic politics for the fire. Their reasoning was that DEI hiring policies implemented by Californian Democrats had led to an

excess of women in local fire stations, and since women are less effective in dealing with fires than men, LA had burned down as a consequence. As absurd as this reasoning is, it nonetheless reflects a tendency to frame nature in cultural terms which is evident on both sides of the political spectrum. Not only do we still notice traces of Western, leftist spiritualism, anthropomorphising nature and claiming that ‘she is reclaiming her territory from us’, but climate scepticism is viewed by the left as one part of a larger conservative constellation. This constellation generally includes pro-life, low taxation, anti-diversity, free-market, or traditionalist stances. Rather than being recognised as an overarching problem that is irreducible to political preferences, the climate is therefore reduced to one part amongst many in a struggle by progressive parties against a right-wing turn in European and US politics.

PUBLIC AND POPULAR BEHAVIOUR RARELY, IF EVER, REFLECTS THE GENUINELY DIRE STATE OF THE ECOLOGICAL PROBLEM EXPRESSED BY CLIMATE SCIENTISTS

The paradox I am insisting on is straightforward yet odd: where it seems that the forces of nature are most aggressively stressed, they are simultaneously most easily reformatted as cultural, political, and subjective problems. We have seen this with categories such as homosexuality. We have even seen it with the subjective appropriation of what we consider to be profoundly natural (DNA or quantum particles). We have also seen this tendency of an endless exchange between culture and nature, or the recognition of something as simultaneously cultural *and* natural, in the history of philosophy. Today, however, it takes on its most troubling manifestation.

It is very easy to assume that scientific unanimity will be followed by personal or popular agreement. The natural ecological facts are clear enough, but as we have all too often seen, nature is easily appropriated, is almost immediately presented as a cultural

discrepancy. In the very moment of comprehending nature, we very easily miscomprehend it. In other words, what is natural can just as easily be cultural, and the climate crisis is no exception.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres was therefore worryingly correct when, during a 2024 meeting of Pacific Island leaders, he suggested that the scale of the ecological crisis was “unimaginable”. It is not only unimaginable in the sense that we cannot know the future consequences of the climate catastrophe, but also in the sense that we ultimately fail to recognise, or imagine, this natural threat without altering and diluting it.

WHERE IT SEEMS THAT THE FORCES OF NATURE ARE MOST AGGRESSIVELY STRESSED, THEY ARE SIMULTANEOUSLY MOST EASILY REFORMATTED AS CULTURAL, POLITICAL, AND SUBJECTIVE PROBLEMS

Humanity certainly has a collective problem to confront with global warming, but an important component is the problem of our understanding of nature itself. What I want to suggest by this essay is something that is generally not considered by ecological policy and climate science: subjective reasoning, and even culture itself, has a persistent tendency to misinterpret nature. As the history of philosophy, as well as the historical meaning of what we consider “natural”, suggests, it would be arrogant to assume that this prejudice no longer applies today. If we are able to confront the malleability and inconsistency which colour the notion of nature and culture, we can only be better situated to understand the profound gap between climate science and public behaviour. Ecology is a very serious threat, and the natural processes underlying climate change cannot be disputed. But the difficult problem – a problem that recent psychoanalytic theorists such as Alenka

Zupančič have touched on – is that this scientific certainty does not neatly correlate with popular thought. To confront this, we have to confront the paradox inherent to the idea of nature itself.

BERGSON AND INTUITIVE KNOWLEDGE

By Alan Shepherd

The French philosopher Henri Bergson affirmed intuition both as the key method of metaphysics and as a way to help us find meaning in life. Related to this, he argued that our lives and experiences can, at times, touch absolute reality, a position that contrasts sharply with Kant's view that reality-in-itself is unknowable and our experience limited to how things appear to us. Bergson's philosophy also stands in contrast to those, such as positivism, which reject subjective or intuitive knowledge as meaningless. In a time when such currents of thought, together with the great progress in scientific knowledge, have undermined the reality of our experience and the status of intuitive or subjective knowledge, Bergson's philosophy, beginning from his original insights into the nature of time, is among those that hold that our experience must be included in our philosophical picture of things along with objective or scientific truth.

Despite the dominance of conceptual, scientific, or intellectual forms of knowledge, we may find that these are limited and unsatisfactory as the sum total of what we can know. What about emotional, experiential, artistic, or spiritual forms of knowledge? Our own understanding of life requires a fuller way of knowing than philosophy often allows for, a knowledge rooted in heart and soul as well as mind. At the deepest level, our connection to reality is personal. What Bergson provides is an explanation of why felt truth, or intuition, is essential to philosophy and is in fact the principle means by which metaphysics advances. As Bergson notes, it is the method through which we directly address the "problems we have most deeply at heart, those which distress the human mind with anxious and passionate insistence. Whence are we? What are we? Whither tend we?"

For Kant, reality in itself was something of a chaos beyond the order and sense imposed on it by the structure of our mind. Our knowledge and experience are limited to operate within this pre-formed domain. In opposition to Kant, however, Bergson's philosophy aims to re-establish the possibility of *direct* intuition into reality, and thus the possibility of the kind of metaphysics which Kant denied. Whereas for Kant time is one of the categories of the human mind that structure our experience, for Bergson, the duration of time is an absolute reality, and, as a first step, we can know, in our immediate consciousness, the duration

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of our inner life directly. From that basis, through his four major works, he opens a new path to intuition which he deepens and expands as his philosophy progresses, beyond our own lives to life in general and to the vital principle of all things.

Bergson's first book is *Time and Free Will* (1889). In it, he develops his notion of "duration": that lived, experienced time is the reality, and that there would be no succession without the past being preserved in consciousness. Clock time, or the time of physics, is derived from this more fundamental time, and though valid and useful for daily life, common sense, and scientific knowledge, it is ultimately relative to practical purposes, not absolutely real. Bergson describes it as time projected into space, that is, instead of intuiting and experiencing time as a continuous duration of absolute novelty, we separate moments of time and set them side by side, like points in an ideal space, and count them as though each was the same and one instant replaced another. When we measure time in this way, we abstract its essence, which is to flow.

BERGSON THOUGHT THAT KANT HAD MADE THE MISTAKE OF ONLY CONSIDERING THIS SPATIALISED FORM OF TIME, TREATING IT AS A FORM OF OUR PERCEPTION ONLY, NOT A REALITY IN ITSELF

Bergson thought that Kant had made the mistake of only considering this spatialised form of time, treating it as a form of our perception only, not a reality in itself. Further, because there is some kind of unity of time and consciousness, these two aspects of time are also two aspects of how we experience our lives. There are, as Bergson puts it, "two different selves, one of which is, as it were, the external projection of the other, its spatial and, so to speak, social

representation". We may have the idea that in some way, somewhere in the background, every moment of our lives, our feelings, and our experience is completely new and unique, never lived before or to be lived again. But most of the time we cannot see it this way, as we blindly follow habits and routines, seeing the present and future in terms of the past, meeting the needs of practical purposes and the necessities which take up much of our lives. Our concomitant habits of thought conceal the unforeseeable novelty.

In the intuition of the duration of our inner lives, by contrast, as we sweep aside these practical habits of thought, we can grasp a part of reality in itself. This self is free because we are alive in the here and now, our past concentrated in the present, in touch with the newness of time and openness of the future. Bergson acknowledges that such moments are rare, and that this is why we are rarely free: "The greater part of the time we live outside ourselves, hardly perceiving anything of ourselves but our own ghost, a colourless shadow which pure duration projects into homogeneous space".

In his second book, *Matter and Memory* (1896), Bergson's subject is the mind-body problem, and he sets out a novel form of dualism, a *temporal* dualism. His ideas about time and intuition are expanded beyond our free action in the present through an investigation of memory. For Bergson, memory is the "intersection of mind and matter". The body and brain are part of the material world, where things do not truly endure, where cause and effect occur of necessity, and where the future state of the material world could theoretically be read in its present; unlike living things, inert matter does not have an irreversible existence in the flow of time. It is in consciousness that the past is preserved and prolonged into the present, the actual; in "pure memory" all the details of the past are retained, albeit mostly unconsciously. Unconscious because, to meet the needs of living, only those memories that are useful to the present are realised.

Bergson thus opposes the dominant view that memories are stored in the brain. Damage to the brain undoubtedly affects memories, but for Bergson, the memories themselves aren't destroyed; rather the mechanism of linking them to motor activity is



at fault. In present action, our memory inserts itself into the “tissue of events” by preparing actions in our body relevant to the situation from past experience. He argues that our perception doesn’t spring from the brain, “the brain is in the material world, the material world is not in the brain”. The nervous system is an interplay of physical elements, and so consciousness itself cannot be generated by it. He attributes to the body the “sole function of directing memory towards the real and of binding it to the present”. On the other hand, “pure memory” exists independent of matter, and the more of our past we can gather up in the present, that is, the more we act with our whole self and live in the moment, the more we transcend the material “meshes of necessity”, the freer we become. Through his consideration of pure memory, Bergson deepens his notion of duration, or real time, the understanding of which is attained by intuition, such that it begins to have an immaterial, spiritual element.

THE NERVOUS SYSTEM IS AN INTERPLAY OF PHYSICAL ELEMENTS, AND SO CONSCIOUSNESS ITSELF CANNOT BE GENERATED BY IT

In his third book, *Creative Evolution* (1907), Bergson applies his notion of duration to the philosophy of evolution, the very idea of which entails a view of time in which the past is prolonged into the present and not just one instant replacing another. At the same time, this book develops his theory of intuition into *the* method of metaphysics, as the intuition of time stretches beyond human life to life in general. Not only is it our essence to endure in a preservation of the past into a new present, but the same is true of all organisms. Indeed, Bergson sees mind as the vital principle of all life; it is the interaction of this “supra-consciousness” and matter that constitutes the evolution of living organisms on earth.

In a phrase reminiscent of Neoplatonism, Bergson notes that “if organisation is, as it were, an awakening of matter, matter can only be a slumber of the mind.” In the process of the evolution of organisms,

consciousness has developed two main branches, or two ways of acting on matter: instinct and intelligence. As they are tendencies evolving from a common origin, there is no complete severance, as each always retains a trace of the other. Nevertheless, the ideal feature of intelligence is constructing instruments from matter, tool-making, whereas that of instinct is using an instrument that forms part of the body, for instance the sting of a scorpion. For Bergson, the evolution of the Hymenoptera to ants and bees exemplifies the development of instinct, while the evolution of vertebrates exemplifies the development of intelligence (although, as already noted, there can be no clear-cut divisions).

Although the human intellect reaches far beyond matter, it is nevertheless formed through the evolution of intelligence in general, that is, through the adaptation of consciousness to matter. Intellect, thus, treats its objects, physical or not, as discontinuous, immobile, and divisible; our conceptual knowledge works on things from the outside, in manipulating them as objects. Instinct, by contrast, bears on *life*. It, as it were, lives out a knowledge of life from within. It is an extension of the process of the organisation of living matter, for example, as in the actions taken by a caterpillar in its metamorphosis. But although the human mind is primarily intellect, we still retain an element of instinct, and intuition is, as Bergson notes, “instinct that has become disinterested, self-conscious, capable of reflecting upon its object and of enlarging it indefinitely”. Instinct and intuition are closer to life than intellect. In fact, intuition continues the vital movement, the “current of consciousness”, enduring in a flow of genuine novelty, whereas intellect takes a static view, looks back at what already exists, and sees the future in terms of the past.

The way that life has evolved on earth is contingent on the material circumstances confronting it. We might have evolved to be more intuitive or to be more intellectual, but, as it happens, consciousness had to adapt itself here primarily to matter, that is, to become for the most part intellect. There is, however, a remnant of intuition in humans, which Bergson considers to be “vague and above all discontinuous”:

It is a lamp almost extinguished, which only glimmers now and then, for a few moments at most. But it

glimmers wherever a vital interest is at stake. On our personality, on our liberty, on the place we occupy in the whole of nature, on our origin and perhaps also on our destiny, it throws a light feeble and vacillating, but which nonetheless pierces the darkness of the night in which the intellect leaves us.

Our intellect is just one aspect of life, formed for understanding and manipulating inert matter. We can apply it to understanding life, but in doing so we transfer to it the forms we customarily apply to matter and translate it in material terms. Intuition makes up this shortfall. It puts us in touch with the immaterial principle of life. In fleeting insights we glimpse the fuller and more profound truth, and this should be the focus of metaphysics as it aims to develop more substantial answers to the vital questions of life.

In his final book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (1932), Bergson considers where the conscious principle, or “creative energy”, at the source of life comes from, and how far intuition can go in knowing it. To begin to answer these questions, we have to extend intuition yet further and look to what mystical intuition can tell us. For Bergson the message that mystics pass on to us is that this creative energy is love: “the love wherein the mystic sees the very essence of God”. And it is the moral vision attending mystical experience that Bergson believes reveals the deepest metaphysical truth – that the fire of love they feel is the very principle of life. He argues that it is through mystical experience that individuals have progressively developed more inclusive forms of human morality, as opposed to morality limited solely to our group or nation.

Our species was originally formed by nature to live in small, closed societies, where our love for our fellows is based on social cohesion and hostility to other groups. The creation of the human species is, like any, a halt on the road of evolution, a check of the current of consciousness by the resistance of matter; but the same creative energy can be continued, beyond what nature “ordained” for our species, in the love felt in mystical intuition and by moral revolutionaries who see better and more worthwhile ways of living and thereby drive humanity forward. In this way, the instinct toward a closed society and

the aspiration toward an open society struggle against one another in the progress of civilisation. In terms of political systems, for Bergson, democracy, with its inviolable rights for humankind, its fraternity, is the furthest removed from the closed society and has its basis and motivation in love. There are inevitable regressions to our more tribal nature, but those who have experienced something of God’s love for humanity, the sages, prophets, saints and those they have inspired, have gradually, as Bergson puts it, “broken down the gates of the city”, envisioned the open society, and led its tentative development in reality.

THE INSTINCT TOWARD A CLOSED SOCIETY AND THE ASPIRATION TOWARD AN OPEN SOCIETY STRUGGLE AGAINST ONE ANOTHER IN THE PROGRESS OF CIVILISATION

Through these four major works, Bergson’s philosophy makes a full and profound case for the importance of intuition in philosophical knowledge. While it is rooted in his core insight about the nature of time, Bergson’s philosophy renews a tradition as old as philosophy itself. One goal of philosophy has always been to try to find a deeper, more meaningful way of being. There is, to a greater or lesser extent, a yearning, a lack, an unsatisfactoriness in ordinary reality; and the various ways of raising the soul in ancient thought, of living more spiritually in religion, of embracing authenticity in existentialism, and so on, can be seen as trying to address this need. Throughout the history of philosophy, intuition was often the most highly valued form of knowledge since it helps us to see more deeply into the nature of reality. Through it, we can achieve a temporary awareness of the Good, the One, God, an inner knowledge of, and participation with, the truth beyond its material, sensible forms, a faint glimmer

or illumination of supreme, immaterial being. Kant's philosophy, which, as we have seen, is to a large degree the background against which Bergson's metaphysics stands, proscribed such metaphysical speculation as beyond possible experience and therefore knowledge. For Kant, we cannot know things as they are because we lack the capacity for intuition that we would need to access such a priori knowledge. Bergson's philosophy, originating from his notion of duration, brings intuition back within experience, and can be seen as a kind of radical empiricism which accommodates both the reality of our experience and objective knowledge. It is, I believe, the major contemporary philosophy that re-establishes intuitive metaphysics, and in doing so also revitalises our connection with the spiritual end of much of past philosophy and helps to keep that tradition alive.

It is important to note that Bergson is not trying to defend institutional religions; rather, he is concerned with personal spiritual experience. For William James, who, like Bergson, was a defender of intuitive knowledge, what religions held in common was that, in heeding intuition, we become conscious that this "higher part is conterminous and continuous with a *more* of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of [us], and which [we] can keep in working touch with, and in a fashion get on board of and save [ourselves] when all [our] lower being has gone to pieces in the wreck." Much of the wisdom handed down to us maintains that beauty, truth and goodness have a spiritual source, so although philosophy must be free from organised religion, we should not separate it completely from spirituality in accounting for what ultimately matters.

Intuitive knowledge is spontaneous, not an effort taking place in abstract discourse. And because it is a form of knowledge about life itself, it is open to all; no qualifications are required or possible, nor is intellectual capacity any use in finding it (although it is in explaining and sharing it); in fact, it is often seen as a hindrance. While we may not be able to fully articulate the meaning we feel on those rare occasions of insight, what we can glean from them is more profound and lasting than anything our practical intellect can provide. It is as though we are above an infinite, or indefinite, maze for a while before we sink back down into it. They are moments of deeper

consciousness, where we find ourselves suddenly awake and immersed in the enduring present, happy at just being, and in that joy, unafraid, and full of goodwill toward life.

Crucially, the search for intuitive truth isn't a disengaged, private concern because it has this moral dimension. To see the truth is to transcend the conceptual and material distinctions which separate us and to experience the unity of life in a way that transforms us and reshapes how we live. In much of the history of philosophy, metaphysics was wedded to the idea of the mind or soul ascertaining truth by trying to grasp something of a higher nature by focusing on a trace of a richer, more divine nature within. We find ourselves largely benighted by our material nature but with a spiritual essence that shines through at times. It is in these moments that we at once gain something of the truth most valuable to us and something of the true love we are impelled to try to realise in our ways of life, our values and our institutions. Intuitive knowledge is always unfinished and imperfect. To inform our philosophy by it will always call for a new effort though it recalls us to the ancient wisdom which we seem to continually forget or fall away from.

SECTION 4:

REVIEWS

ON HOUSECRAFT

Emma Wilkins reviews *Home Work: Essays on Love & Housekeeping* by Helen Hayward (Puncher & Wattmann, 2023)

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The book *Home Work* by Helen Hayward, like the labour it explores, will be easily dismissed. I like my home, and I like it when it's clean and tidy, but I don't like cleaning or tidying, and I'm not inclined to read about it. I love to bake, to fill a vase with flowers, peg out washing with bare feet in summertime; but I'm more likely to make the bathroom "less dirty" than "properly clean" or the living room "less messy", than "actually tidy", and I'm sure I'm not alone. *Home Work*. I wasn't drawn to the topic, or to the book's stark orange cover, and I'd never heard of the author; but the subtitle – "Essays on Love and Housekeeping" – piqued my interest. Love? I opened up the book.

The first surprise was that the foreword was penned by someone I *had* heard of. In it, Alain de Botton confronts the common assumption that housekeeping is not pleasurable or worthwhile, and that domestic matters are "beneath the dignity of the sophisticated individual". Helen Hayward understands this attitude. She understands why, when she answers the door wearing an apron – an almost provocative act nowadays – people look her up and down. In the affluent culture that is Hayward's context, and mine, we are more likely to boast about how little housework we do, even how poorly, than about how much we do, or how well. Even when domestic duties include some of the most important work a human can do – raising another human – we argue for our right to outsource it. Perhaps, if stereotypes and power imbalances hadn't dictated who was responsible for unpaid work, and who was not, for quite so long, we'd see it in a different light. But imbalances persist.

It's been a decade since political journalist and commentator Annabel Crabb, author of *The Wife Drought*, argued that the reason men can "have it all" – families and demanding careers – without "doing it all", is that their wives are still hard at work behind the scenes. More recently, Anna Funder's *Wifedom*, a part-researched, part-imagined account of the many ways in which George Orwell benefited from, and took for granted, his wife's physical and intellectual labour – provoked another round of discussion (and rage). Recent years have also seen Harvard-trained organisational manager Eve Rodsky release a book and set of cards to help couples divide household work more evenly, making the *New York Times* bestseller list in the process; while a French comic

artist's suggestion that no matter how much men "help" with domestic duties, women are still exerting energy to delegate them, has seen "mental load" memes go viral. But even when men uphold ideals of equal pay and equal opportunities with passion and conviction, which many do, for a range of reasons – social, systemic, historic, ideological, biological, practical, relational – the bulk of the work still falls to women. It's simpler if you live alone, and either clean up after yourself, or pay somebody to. It's the experience of communal living – cooking for others, cleaning up after them, having them clean up after us; and the time that this might take from a career – that continues to frustrate, and to divide.

Stories of couples who have found a happy balance do exist, but remain rare. Then again, striking a happy balance with housemates, or between parents and children, is rare too. Sometimes it's easy to assign responsibility, often it's not. Dust settles, crumbs accumulate, paint peels, appliances break. Even if we could make each person in a household responsible for offsetting only (and all) the wear, tear, and mess they personally cause, or devise a roster that ensures each person works precisely as hard for others, as others work for them, the limits imposed by different restraints – from age, to ability, to time – mean not every member of a household *could* take equal responsibility.

Even if we can find ways to ensure no party feels hard done by or oppressed, even if we take gender out of the equation, I can't see our attitudes to the work itself changing any time soon. Consider how common it now is to reflect on our performance in the workplace, and strive to improve it; and how uncommon it is to do this with our performance in the home. As Wendell Berry notes when discussing agricultural labour in *The Need to Be Whole*, we've come to associate success not with the work of our bodies and our hands, but with well-paying rungs on corporate ladders. When Joanna Maciejewska quipped, "I want AI to do my laundry and dishes so that I can do art and writing, not for AI to do my art and writing so that I can do my laundry and dishes," the chord it struck rang long and loud.

With some notable exceptions (one being the self-professed "Tradwife", and the inevitably performative

depictions of domestic bliss that some broadcast on social media), the assumption that few would stay home if they had the choice has become about as widespread as answering your door in an apron (one you *use*) has become rare. Running our own houses – cooking, cleaning, tidying, budgeting, buying, repairing, recycling, disposing, replacing – earns us neither money nor prestige. It's not that we don't want tidy, clean homes; or that we don't lust after beautiful ones. We take pride in our homes when they're well kept; we are embarrassed when they're not "presentable". What we don't take pride in is the sometimes tedious, sometimes dirty, sometimes exhausting, often thankless unpaid work that makes them so. *Home Work's* author, in deeming that work worthy of her time, her attention, and her intellect, is an outlier.

WE'VE COME TO ASSOCIATE SUCCESS NOT WITH THE WORK OF OUR BODIES AND OUR HANDS, BUT WITH WELL-PAYING RUNGS ON CORPORATE LADDERS

Hayward has worked in publishing, taught in universities, and trained in psychotherapy; she's always had other work to do, but she came to doubt it was necessarily *better* work, and to devote more time to what she calls "home work". For a long time, she'd still answer the question, "What do you do?" by saying she was a writer and teacher, but she was conscious that her domestic "job" could be "equally challenging, time consuming and interesting". Hayward says her younger self would have been shocked to hear her describe housework so positively. She loved her childhood home, and wasn't ungrateful for the time her mother spent running it, but she told herself *she'd* never stoop to such trivial concerns; *she'd* never let *her* life revolve around something so insular. She thought women

who took pride in cakes and curtains were “consoling” themselves and avoiding the “real” challenges of life: “They were making themselves feel better about a life which subordinated their desires to their family’s needs, to a life without power or a room of their own.”

THE NOTION THAT TIME SPENT IN THE HOME, CARING FOR ONE’S FAMILY, COULD BE WASTED TIME, IS A RELATIVELY RECENT ONE

But even before having children, even against her better judgement, she was drawn to domestic work. She appreciated order and aesthetics; sometimes she found herself *enjoying* the labour required to achieve a clean, comfortable home. After starting a family, she found that routines that fostered order gave more than they took. There came a point when Hayward consciously resolved to embrace the “nonreciprocal nature of family love” and do the lion’s share of household work. It didn’t interest her husband, but it mattered to her. He didn’t coerce her into doing more, she chose to. She knew she might rue not having “travelled more, earned more, learned more, networked more”, but she also knew that she enjoyed the work, and its rewards. As Hayward’s children grew older, she knew she could reasonably ask more of them than she did. It’s not that she wouldn’t have appreciated more help, or at least the offer of it, but she was also conscious *she* didn’t offer *her* mother help as a child. She came to accept that her desire “to nurture family, to be warm, generous and practically loving” through the medium of housework wasn’t shared by her family. She didn’t want to spoil her kids, but she was conscious, too, that they wouldn’t live at home forever. One day, they would leave. One day, her ability to care for them in ways so practical, so intimate, would end. One day, they’d have “home work” of their own.

Hayward knew she would always feel “complicated” about her decision to do more than her fair share, and

she was right. When her mother, nearing the end of a life spent largely in the home, asked: “Do you think that I’ve wasted my life?”, Hayward was haunted by the question. She brushed it off in the moment: of course her mother didn’t “waste” her life; but despite her own all-too conscious choices, she wondered if *her* children would come to think *she’d* wasted hers.

The notion that time spent in the home, caring for one’s family, could be wasted time, is a relatively recent one. Aristotle viewed work performed to acquire wealth a means to an end, while recognising that “oikonomia” or “household management” contributed to the wellbeing of the community, thereby serving a higher purpose. Many throughout history have aspired to dedicate themselves to a family, a house, and yes, housework. But even if we do manage to detach domestic work from the “subtle form of chauvinism” that Hayward realises once “coloured” her attitude, will we ever view it as important once again? If we value altruism, then to the extent it’s done for others, we ought to do so. But this would require us to value individual status, prestige, and success less. It would also require us to rediscover an appreciation for the work of “our bodies and our hands”; and work done in service of those whose bodies are less able than our own; not to mention humility itself.

Most of us will do at least some housework in the course of our lives. Some, Hayward says, will spend a quarter of their waking hours on it. That Hayward doesn’t only explore “home work” in the abstract is evidence of her passion for it. In fact, she spends some time detailing the benefits, the “art” and satisfactions, of running a home well – presumably so interested readers can profit from what she’s learned. The practicalities didn’t always hold this reader’s interest, particularly when next-level standards or a next-level budget were involved or implied – but I found the notion that domestic work might have something to teach those who, for whatever reason, perform it, potentially liberating. What if those of us who can’t escape the work and must devote at least some time to it – which is surely most of us to some extent – could find ways to accept, even value, even embrace it? To find stimulation and satisfaction in not

only doing our share but learning to do it well? And what if those who enjoy the work could understand it, and themselves, well enough to admit this without feeling conflicted, judged, ashamed? Even (especially) if we're not as drawn to it as Hayward is, it could be an opportunity to practice selflessness, kindness, and humility, while resisting pride and laziness. Far from being a "waste" of time, it could be time spent thinking, reflecting, practising, and learning.

It could benefit our health as well. There is a point in *Home Work* where Hayward, while renovating, finds scraping, sanding, staining floorboards, opens a "loose, open, meditative" frame of mind. In a world where people claim they have no time to think, and are often chained to desks in front of screens, washing and drying, sorting and scrubbing, could help us exercise restless bodies and calm overstimulated minds. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir notes that "few tasks are more similar to the torment of Sisyphus than those of the housewife; day after day, one must wash dishes, dust furniture, mend clothes that will be dirty, dusty, and torn again". But if it weren't for the fact the work is paid, sitting in front of a screen, scrolling here, clicking there, day in and day out, might feel more futile still.

I've experienced the satisfaction that comes from having a stimulating career, but I've also experienced the satisfaction that comes from caring for a family and a home. Yes, it meant doing more cooking – which I enjoy – and cleaning – which I don't – but it was my choice, and it's brought me more joy than my career, not less. I don't regret it. I didn't envy or resent my husband for having less time at home, more time at work; I didn't wish childcare was cheaper so we could outsource it in service of my career; I didn't think of myself as a martyr. Not all those who end up doing more domestic work than their partner, or housemate, or adult kids, will feel this way, but we should resist assuming the more domestic work a person does, the more they're to be pitied, or that the more a person works outside the home, the more important they and their work must be.

Hayward imparts many lessons, but the one that I liked best is that we might as well do what needs doing anyway, with grace. I know how it feels to clean resentfully, and I know it does me and my family more harm than good. The challenge is to do our share with willingness, even cheer. We can use the time to think, to meditate, to plan, to pray. The domestic work we do and how we go about it won't earn us accolades, but if we seek to have right motives – if we focus not on what we're owed but what we owe, and might freely give – our characters, and our relationships, will profit. In the case of someone who lives alone, there might be no obvious "other" to bless. Still, it can be noble, character-building work. In *Man the Reformer*, Ralph Waldo Emerson suggested as much when he talked about the "elegance" of doing for ourselves what others could do for us. After declaring society full of those who "incessantly summon others to serve them", he said that having few wants, and tending to those wants ourselves, might look "inelegant" yet be "an elegance forever and to all".

IN A WORLD WHERE PEOPLE CLAIM THEY HAVE NO TIME TO THINK, WASHING AND DRYING, SORTING AND SCRUBBING COULD HELP US EXERCISE RESTLESS BODIES AND CALM OVERSTIMULATED MINDS

De Botton ends his foreword by suggesting that by choosing to "stay in", to patch a hole in a garment, or rearrange a room, we might "overcome the wish to live too much in the minds of strangers", and be glad. Attending to the spaces we retreat to, restoring order when chaos begins to reign, might also teach us something about what it means to be embodied creatures. We are able to shape our environment in some ways, but not in others and, in ways we won't always notice or understand, we are shaped by it. The display of beauty that flowers in a vase, whether grown ourselves or plucked from a neighbour's

overhanging plant – the warmth of light, streaming between curtains; the scent of air, flowing through a window opened wide – might influence our mood, our thinking, even our interactions, more than we realise.

IT'S NOT SURPRISING THAT, IN A SECULAR INDIVIDUALISTIC CULTURE, CULTIVATING SERVANT-HEARTED HUMILITY HOLDS LITTLE APPEAL

It's easy to think of ourselves “more highly than we ought”, to prize others' opinions too much, to steer clear of demeaning tasks, and look down on those who perform them. It's not surprising that, in a secular individualistic culture, cultivating servant-hearted humility holds little appeal. Work done in the home might not earn us money, or praise, or even gratitude. But the more we're motivated by care, and love, the more noble the work is. What if we sought to embrace it? We'd still need to share it – to teach children (and urge some spouses) to clean up for themselves and contribute – but that doesn't mean we couldn't also, at times, throw away the ledger and embrace life's messiness; serve those who can't, or won't, serve us; not because we must, but because we can. And if, for whatever reason, for whatever length of time, we don't or can't do our “fair share”, we can thank, even respect, even admire, those who do.

“THE END” IS NOT THE END

Nishok G U reviews *On Extinction: Beginning Again at the End* by Ben Ware (Verso Books, 2024)

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We live in an age of extinctions and endings: extreme climate events, the sixth mass extinction of species, global pandemics, political and economic instabilities, massive social and cultural upheavals, the renewed possibility of nuclear annihilation, accelerated development of AI, and more that could not only end the human race but life on earth as we know it.

These terrifying developments, Ben Ware writes in one of the most evocative passages in his 2024 book, *On Extinction: Beginning Again at the End*, have “intensified a series of sad passions and alienating symptoms: surplus rage, hyper-anxiety, cynical resignation, the addiction to numbing forms of enjoyment, identitarian narcissism, collective paranoia, melancholic withdrawal, historical forgetting... What we are talking about here then is a new kind of traumatized psychic reality, a new wounded subjectivity.”

In a time of converging crises, Ben Ware’s book is a timely, creative, radical, slightly counterintuitive but ultimately generative reflection on the many catastrophes we face today. I say counterintuitive because instead of seeing extinctions solely as world-ending events, he sees in them – in a classic dialectical fashion – a possibility of resurgence and renewal. They are an opportunity to perform a “Master Reset” on all domains of human life: philosophical, political, economic, social, cultural and ecological. His enduring question throughout is: *Can we begin again at the end?* But what would it even mean to begin again at the end, philosophically, politically, and otherwise? And more importantly, *how* do we do that? In a conversation from last year, Ware remarked that the history of modern European philosophy can be re-read as a history of thinking about extinctions or the end of the world. In fact, he begins his book with one such example from Kant. In his late essay, “The End of All Things,” Kant claims that it is the idea of the final end that gives worth to the lives of rational beings, without which “creation itself appears purposeless... like a play with no resolution and affording no cognition of any rational aim.” Endings have not only been a chief concern of modern Western philosophy; contemporary popular culture is also obsessed with them too, as seen in the recent explosion of apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic films.

Ware picks out two ways endings have been imagined in contemporary cinema. One is the end as a *sublime event*, “as a spectacular catastrophe, an abrupt and

violent intrusion from elsewhere.” This is a familiar trope, where an external event (such as a massive meteorite) brings about mass extinction. But this, Ware thinks, has the effect of displacing “all evil from inside the world (capitalist economic and social relations) to outside (the chaotic universe itself).” Framing the end as a sublime event thus serves as a psychic defence against facing up to the reality that the present state of the world, where late capitalism’s depredation of our politics, culture, and ecology is allowed free rein, is *never* going to end. It is with this in mind that Ware evokes Fredric Jameson’s famous line: “It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism.”

WARE THINKS THAT THE PHILOSOPHICAL PESSIMISM UNDERLYING ANTI-NATALISM IS NOT RADICAL ENOUGH. IN FACT, IT MIGHT, IN THE END, BE VERY OPTIMISTIC

This connects to the second idea of the end understood as *stuckness*, as endless repetition, “an end that seems to play out endlessly.” This is the idea that the horror that is our present will go on forever, repeat itself on a loop, with no change or transformation in sight. This is, in fact, a constant refrain throughout the book. Ware quotes Eric Cazdyn to make the point that “we have entered a new chronic mode, a meantime with no end... an undying present that remains forever sick.” Shortly after, he goes on to say: “We appear to find ourselves stuck in an arrested time: unable to move either fully forwards or fully backwards... [our] expanding present acquires the character of a limbo state.”

Several “solutions” have been proposed as a way out of this “limbo state”. Ware critically considers two such controversial responses to the contemporary crises – anti-natalism and de-extinction – both of

which, he thinks, fall terribly short.

The philosophical core of anti-natalism is this: human life, any human life, is such that the quantum of pain far exceeds the quantum of pleasure, so the best thing would be never to have been born at all. But as we are already here, the next best thing would be to end ourselves, either by engaging in voluntary mass suicide or by refusing to procreate and adding new life to this tragic existence. The ecological variant of this thought, which Ware calls “ecological anti-natalism,” goes as follows: all of nature’s woes are due to human beings, so the only way to protect and save nature is to kill ourselves.

Ware raises two objections against anti-natalism. One is that it equates existence with suffering, without being sensitive to the fact that suffering and misery are unequally distributed in a world ravaged by inequalities. It thus reifies the current matrix of human relations and endorses an apolitical explanation of society’s pathologies. Second, and more importantly, anti-natalism has no imagination of an alternative future. It tacitly endorses the idea that there is no real alternative to capitalism. Though anti-natalism rightly calls into question the uncritical optimism that animates much contemporary liberal politics, it also keeps us stuck in a “dull presentism” in which “the possibility of new collective forms of life remains eternally repressed.”

But the anti-natalist, a sympathetic reader might think, has not bothered to imagine a different future because any such future will be tragic and full of suffering too. By giving up on the possibility of a better future, they simply stay true to their fundamentally pessimistic worldview. However, Ware thinks that the philosophical pessimism underlying anti-natalism is *not radical enough*. In fact, it might, in the end, be very optimistic. It has been said, most famously by Adorno, that we cannot live right in a wrong world. But the anti-natalist at least hopes to *die right* in a wrong world. For Ware, however, this hope is ultimately misplaced, for capitalism is so rotten from the inside that even death and dying cannot be meaningful or salient in a world organised by these destructive relations.

Next, onto de-extinction or resurrection biology. (What a theological-sounding name for a contemporary branch of biological science!) As the name suggests,

de-extinction attempts to bring back extinct species through the use of genetic technologies. First, de-extinction has been proposed as a response to the enormous biodiversity loss we are witnessing today, a supposed bulwark against the sixth mass extinction. Second, it is meant to inject some hope against the doom and gloom that typically characterizes contemporary ecological discourse. However, given that the circumstances causing the current extinctions are only getting worse, it is not clear what recovering extinct species is supposed to achieve. And, we are still largely in the dark about the consequences of restoring these animals back into the wild.

Beyond these standard criticisms, Ware argues that de-extinction is only the most extreme instance of what he calls the “anthropocentric sublime,” i.e. “an attempt to create new forms of wonder and awe on the back of planetary wreckage... This attempt to fill out nature’s “lack,” to cork the ecological hole, is quite clearly a drive towards mastery.” On the one hand, it positions itself as the new “ecological theology.” It hopes to fix climate change and reverse mass extinction and “save” nature by trying to bring back to life long-dead “charismatic megafauna.” But, on the other hand, this ecological theory is at its core apocalyptic. What underlies it is a perverse tenet of bio-capitalism: living things reduced to mere packets of genetic code that can be controlled, manipulated, and traded.

Where else do we look if these contemporary responses to the converging crises are not good enough? How do we *actually* begin again at the end? I will highlight three strands of Ware’s thinking on this.

First, Ware talks about the idea of “looking extinction in the face,” especially in relation to the Lars von Trier film, *Melancholia* (2011). The moment of transformation for the severely depressed protagonist, Justine, comes when she is lying by the side of a creek, completely naked, gazing up at the sky and seeing the planet *Melancholia* hurtling towards Earth – a moment of *actually* looking extinction in the face. Instead of striking terror or inducing despair, such a moment completely enlivens and transforms Justine. She is born anew in that moment. Ware thinks this is because she can finally begin again from zero. She reaches the

point of the end, of extinction, of nothingness, not to stop there, but to go beyond nothing, to unleash “the joy of new things.”

ANY POLITICS THAT IS INFORMED BY PSYCHOANALYSIS HAS TO RECOGNISE THAT TOTAL REDEMPTION OF HUMAN SUBJECTS WILL NECESSARILY AND ALWAYS FAIL

Building on the work of Simone Weil, Ware suggests that we can engage in a process of “revolutionary decreation,” through which “the subject enters a ‘zone of daring’ and experiences its own symbolic death as a necessary part of a creative process of rebirth, of beginning again at the end.” This is nothing less than an attempt to *redeem* humanity. But Ware’s firm grounding in psychoanalysis spurs him to add a few caveats to what is at stake in this undertaking. What are we talking about when we talk about redeeming humanity? First, any politics that is informed by psychoanalysis has to recognise that total redemption of human subjects will necessarily and always fail, not because revolutions are doomed to fail (as cynics would have us believe), but because alienation is a *constitutive* feature of human subjectivity.

What revolutionary decreation or redemption can and should be aimed at is the more modest goal of undoing and transcending what Ware calls “surplus alienation.” All we can hope to create, Ware argues, is a “future of liberated, classless neurotics – neurotic because that just is the basic structure of human speaking beings – who, no longer subject to the mute compulsion of life-devouring market logic, are now able to realize actual freedom and genuine creativity in both their everyday actions and their collective relations with others.” This is the re-imagined vision for a redeemed humanity that a psychoanalytically-informed politics can take us towards.

The second strand of Ware's thinking involves breaking free of outmoded forms of temporality and reimagining our relationship with time itself. According to Ware, we typically take two attitudes to world-ending catastrophes. We either think they are going to arrive tomorrow (which never quite arrives and only recedes endlessly into the horizon) and thus never get around to action, or we are called on to act "as if" the catastrophe has already happened, so that we act *now* in order to prevent the worst from happening.

ONE WAY TO THINK ABOUT BEGINNING AGAIN AT THE END IS TO SAY THAT IT INVOLVES A WILL TO CREATE FROM ZERO

On the one hand, then, we are told it is already *too late*. No matter what we try to do now, it will not matter much, for the moment to act has already passed. Alternatively, we may think there is still time to intervene meaningfully, but that window is closing fast, so we had better *act now*. He finds both to be problematic: "While 'too late' leads in the direction of melancholic inaction, 'act now' imitates various forms of narcissistic hyperactivity." Ware recommends a third approach, which is to situate oneself *within* the moment of catastrophe – for it is *already* here, as evidenced by recurring and extreme weather events, mass extinction of species and global pandemics.

The third and final strand concerns the nature of revolutionary activity itself. Early on in the book, Ware asks a provocative question: "How might we imagine a future that is not simply an extension of the blighted present?" The French philosopher Claude Lefort believed that the best revolutions of the past had a double movement of time built into them: "[T]hey turned towards the past, but only as a precondition for 'opening on to the future.'" The nature of revolutionary activity is such that it reaches back into the past, summons it back to life by realising its revolutionary potential in the present, and, in the process, creates a radically different and more liveable future.

As we have seen, one way to think about *beginning*

again at the end is to say that it involves a will to create from zero. But this does not mean that we have to start from scratch entirely. And such a thing is not possible anyway. As Ware puts it, "There are, strictly speaking, no blank pages on which the text of history can be written." We have inherited pages that are already "overwritten by the hands of previous generations." The goal of revolutionary activity is simply to make these texts from the past legible to the present generation, i.e. "an actualization of a past that has not yet fully existed, a past that still remains ahead of us in time."

Let me end by raising two concerns with this otherwise remarkable book. In the final chapter, Ware evokes Walter Benjamin's idea of "political barbarism" as a way of confronting capitalism's ills and transforming society from within:

It is by rupturing the omnipresent present – the present as stuckness – that politics is able to bring the past back into being, to retroactively awaken the blocked possibilities of previous failed revolutionary attempts. In this respect, the new political barbarism will strive towards what Marx calls *the conscious completion of old work*.

A central figure for political barbarism is the *destructive character*, who, as Benjamin puts it in his essay of the same name, "knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away... Not only by brute force; sometimes by the most refined means... What exists he reduces to rubble – not for the sake of the rubble, but for that of the way leading through it." And this kind of politics, most strikingly, is carried out with a laugh, which is to say a "barbaric laugh."

In a similar vein, Ware talks about the idea of the "revolutionary demonic": "Like the demonic, revolutionary activity is itself marked by a terrifying excess: it negates what we understand as 'ethics', 'politics', 'subjectivity', and in this respect it shakes reality to its very core. There really is a sense in which revolutionary upheaval is monstrous, horrifying and sublime." And once again, in the final chapter, Ware says, "the new, both experientially and materially, can come about only through a fully accomplished destruction. Against capitalist destruction, what is

needed is the ‘rejuvenating’ and ‘cheerful’ destruction of capitalism itself”.

All these passages hint at the place and problem of political violence, which is an issue that any radical politics has to confront. What is the nature of political violence? Are there acceptable and unacceptable forms of it? Can violence be “ethical,” so far as revolutionary politics is concerned? Unfortunately, Ware does not take up these questions in the book.

Furthermore, his own attitude and views on violence are not fleshed out. Is he advocating for political violence? If so, what kind and form(s) of violence? How does he justify this proposal? On the other hand, if he is not advocating for violence, why are there such explicit references to violence, aggression, and destruction in the text? What role do they play in the larger scheme of the book or his argument? Are they merely for rhetorical effect? Or do they have larger philosophical as well as political purposes?

Another problem is Ware’s restricted reading of “the present.” Ware, who gives a dialectical twist to almost every concept and idea in the book, does not sufficiently explore the dialectical potential and possibilities of the present. As I have shown, the present is predominantly associated with stuckness, deadness, a blight that needs to be resisted or escaped from. But the present is and can be so much more than that. While I understand the impulse to avoid the dangers of a status quo-maintaining politics, there is another side, as it were, to the present, which is best embodied and exemplified by many of our richest contemplative traditions.

They can help us not only rethink the present (from a site of stuckness to one of liberation), but also change our relationship to it (from aversion or rejection to thoroughly inhabiting it). The oft-repeated mindfulness meditation instruction of “coming back into the present moment,” instead of ignoring the past or denying the future, is aimed at creating enough *spaciousness* within oneself such that one can open to and stay with difficult truths and harsh realities (of the kind that Ware exposes in his book) and, in doing so, genuinely and consciously make a different choice, a radical choice, and thus move towards new, even hitherto unimagined, possibilities and futures.

There is also a certain instrumentality to Ware’s treatment and understanding of the present. It is largely seen as a mere means or a stage for enacting the “conscious completion of old work” or a springboard for moving

into a “radically different future.” But what he does not adequately recognise is the uniqueness and singularity of each moment (“You can’t step into the same river twice”) that requires a special kind of sensitivity and (non-instrumental) attention, in order to “reveal” its nature and potentialities.

IF HE IS NOT ADVOCATING FOR VIOLENCE, WHY ARE THERE SUCH EXPLICIT REFERENCES TO VIOLENCE, AGGRESSION, AND DESTRUCTION IN THE TEXT?

Even decisions and choices about which revolutionary “pathways” to follow are best made following an intimate engagement with the moment that is here and now. That is perhaps the best way to know what the most *appropriate* course of action *for this moment* is. Not all of our many pasts are *actually* accessible to us right now. Not all of the many possible futures are *actually* open to us right now. So, even if one were to think, like Ware, that the game of revolution is played in the fields of pasts and futures, a close and *attuned engagement* with the present is indispensable in order to know which pasts and futures one could and should lean into. Without it, our actions, including revolutionary ones, would be far less effective and transformative in the world. The dialectical, generative, and, dare I say, *revolutionary* potential of the present is so immense yet, sadly, underexplored and underemphasized in this book.

What is more ironic is that the words that most resonate throughout Ware’s book – the idea of beginning again at the end – immediately bring to one’s mind the famous Zen instruction: “Begin again!” And to my mind, that’s indication enough of the immense generative potential and cross-learnings that can come from putting revolutionary politics in dialogue with our contemplative practices across various traditions. The resultant “meditative politics” can teach us not only how to begin again at the end, but also *how to begin again in the here and now*.

RESISTING RESIGNATION

Miranda Anderson reviews *Resistance*, curated by Steve McQueen and Clarrie Wallis, and *Resistance: How Protest Shaped Britain and Photography Shaped Protest*, edited by Steve McQueen, Clarrie Wallis, and Sarah Harrison (Monument Books, 2025).

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At Turner Contemporary, the human drama is given an oceanic backdrop. Margate's washed-out seascape offers an expanse of diffuse light that resists my gaze's search for an end point.

My footsteps echo across the floors of a gallery that seems nearly empty of people or art. Yet as I wander the gallery, I am mirrored by swarms of people that seem to flurry across the walls. From behind the glass of orderly, and often rather small, black and white photos, jubilant masses rush towards me arms raised, sometimes alongside grim-faced placard-carrying companions, while in others children play amidst rubble, friends embrace, and couples kiss. I am reminded of sitting on the floor of a darkened room in New York's sedate Metropolitan Museum of Art, when Wolfgang Tillman's video installation of pounding music, flashing lights, and twirling mirror ball appeared on screen, creating a reflection not only on the artificiality of that dance club environment, but of that which we were in.

As I cross room after room, I am passing through a century of Britain's past. *Resistance*, curated by Steve McQueen and Clarrie Wallis, is itself an act of resistance: like many of McQueen's other works, it questions, extends, and complicates existing historical narratives. Gathered together from a wide array of often underfunded archives, the photos record humans rising up, or laying down, in protest against the supposed norms and conventions in which they found themselves. Shifting between individuals, couples, and collectives gathered together by some feature for which they were oppressed, such as their gender, sexuality, race, religion, disability or occupation, the quality of the black and white printing of the photographs gives some a trompe l'oeil depth, while highlighting continuities across diverse causes and already creating a nostalgic sense of historical distance from this largely pre-smart phone era. These photos are printed and presented with a care that underlines the importance of the stories they tell: the transformation of human rights and improved living conditions that we still just about hold in our grasp.

The accompanying book interweaves critical reflections on achievements in the century spanning a 1903 Suffragette March and the 2003 Anti-Iraq War Protest. The photograph that greets you as you enter the gallery is of Annie Kenney, a suffragette and cotton mill



worker, being arrested in London in 1913. Dressed in white with her hair flowing lyrically around her face, her ecstatic expression seems to surge from out of the frame. Amidst the chartered streets of tenements and dark waves of police enclosing her, Kenney's certainty in the rightness of her cause cascades out of this historical moment, directly at the viewer. In his introduction, Gary Younge observes that "resistance has a life of its own", a physics-like quality such that even when individual actions have failed, energy is transmitted across people and places sustaining and inspiring a "cascading sense of possibility" (15, 25). The figures in the photographs create haunting images that gesture towards alternative futures that may have come to pass were it not for the acts of those who resisted. Their captured energies are presented to us as catalysts for our own lives, even or especially when their aims have not yet been achieved.

Like the rooms of the exhibition, the chapters in the book takes you through the emergence and evolution of

protest movements throughout the century, including women's, worker's, unemployed, black, LGBT, and disability rights, anti-fascism, anti-nuclear, anti-war and environmentalism. Reflect on each area in turn and the extent of what was accomplished across the century is wondrous: take almost any British individual you pass on almost any street and there will be some way in which they have benefited because these people protested. In 1903 almost eighty percent of the UK population were disenfranchised. The recentness of some changes still holds the power to shock: Northern Ireland did not gain universal suffrage till 1969, the first disability rights law was 1995, and equality of the homosexual age of consent was 2000.

Yet despite such gains, around us there rises resignation to immorality and injustice amidst a marketized digital and technological proliferation that while proffering optimisation of our lives, instead delivers dysfunctional bureaucracies and incalcitrant automated shopping tills. While we apparently exist

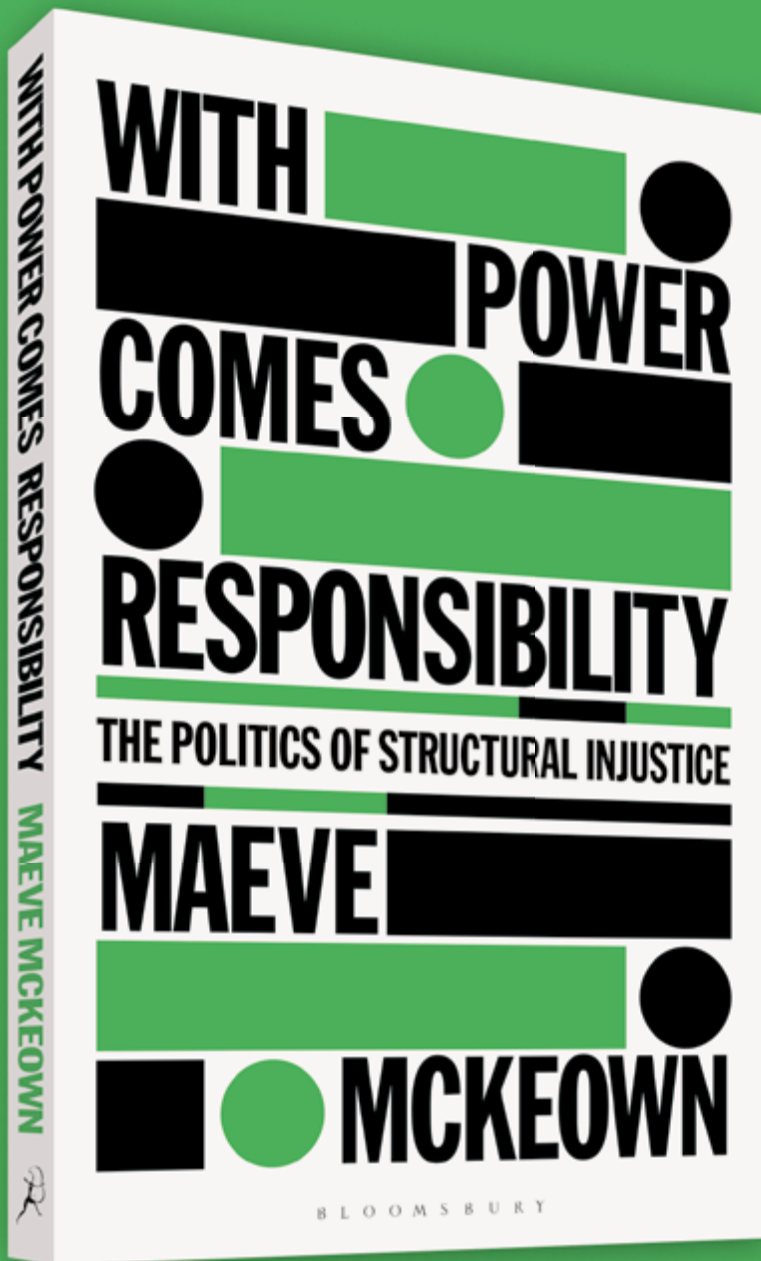
in a century that is widening access to knowledge, Paul Gilroy stresses the amplification of biased narratives alongside the elision of others. The commodification of attention, social media filters, and search engines primed with others' intentions and interests are generating "a weakening of the imagination that incubates the loss of hope" (119). This exhibition is a timely reminder of the possibility of change through protest: it celebrates the roles of both individual and collective action, and foregrounds the role of the arts as modes of intervening in injustices and transforming beliefs and practices.

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The parallel story is that this was an epoch that saw the transformation of photography in the century spanning the Suffragette and the Anti-Iraq War protests. Emma Lewis comments that awareness of photography's power predates this: Frederick Douglass in his 1861 lecture on "Pictures and Progress" was already lauding photography's capacity to change thought and so transform society (48). Evident here too are surveillance images taken by police or press which sought to constrain and undermine those captured on camera. In some, those photographed deliberately attempt to outwit their image capture through distorting their faces into odd expressions or closing their eyes, as if this might make them vanish. In the period when people were simply unused to being photographed or as photography was morphing from no longer requiring prolonged stillness, the eerily transfixed gazes create in the viewer too an imitative moment of surprisal, and then a question: how did just being observed in this way mark their minds by memorialising that moment?

The exhibition prompts viewers to a moment of reflection amidst what Antony Gormley terms "the

flow of lived time": outside the gallery, one of his cast iron men stands motionless amidst the waves, seeming now to embody our peculiar lack of concerted response to rising seas; as does Mona Hatoum's work *Hotspot*, a companion work located in the gallery entry. Hatoum highlights the scale of current issues through materialising the entire earth as a "hotspot": a human-sized flickering red neon cage through which the sea line on the horizon is visible beyond. These works in concert with the exhibition itself convey the need for us to scale up our imaginations beyond our own transitory individual lives to the epic and global scale needed to tackle today's crises and to reflect on how our own words and acts are serving to create the future. Unlike T.S. Eliot's "humble people" imagined on Margate Sands who "demand nothing", it is instead, as Michelle Obama urges, time for us to "Do something!"



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