

Ethics as a Problem for Marxism

A moral philosophy . . . characteristically presupposes a sociology.

—MacIntyre 1985, 23

The refutation must not come from outside, that is, it must not proceed from assumptions lying outside the system in question and inconsistent with it. The system need only refuse to recognise those assumptions; the defect is a defect only for him who starts from the requirements and demands based on those assumptions.

—Hegel 1969, 581

Marx and Modern Moral Theory

Modern moral philosophy emerged, in part, as a reaction against those materialist models of human agency which, drawing on themes from the scientific revolution, attempted to explain human behavior reductively by reference to our materiality. If Thomas Hobbes' interpretation of human nature was perhaps the most powerful early attempt to articulate such an approach, the continued popularity of something like his reductive model amongst evolutionary psychologists and proponents of selfish gene theory is evidence that its appeal shows little sign of abating (Swami 2007; cf Rose & Rose eds. 2000). Whatever the merits of this type of explanation of human behavior, it is at its weakest when confronted with the problem of human freedom; the fact that we always choose how to respond to our natural urges and desires. It was in response to the dilemmas faced when making such reasoned choices that a counter-movement to the reductive paradigm emerged. Classically articulated by Immanuel Kant, the idealist alternative to reductive materialism attempted

to disarticulate the act of choosing from our human desires: the new science of morality taught that an unbridgeable gulf existed between what we ought to do and what we are inclined by our nature to do.

There is something appealing about both materialist and idealist models. It seems intuitively right to suppose that underlying the complex web of our actions is a desire to meet our natural needs; while it also true that on many occasions we choose to act so as to suppress or order our desires. Nevertheless, despite the undoubted attraction of these models of agency, neither seems adequate to the task of grasping what is distinctive about our humanity. For if materialists reduce us to little more than machines built for the satisfaction of our natural desires, idealists suggest that we should repress our natural desires when we make decisions about the ways we ought to act. These approaches therefore look less like alternatives than they do two sides of the same mistake: both analyze our activities in a way that makes them “unintelligible as a form of *human action*” (MacIntyre 2008a, 58).

Marx, as Lukács argued, aimed to overcome the opposition between materialism and idealism. His intention was to extend Hegel’s attempt to synthesize causal, materialist models of behavior with purposeful, idealist accounts of agency, and, by divesting the result of its religious coloration, provide a framework through which our actions could be understood as *human actions* (Lukács 1975, 345). Marx’s approach to the problem of human action therefore involved an attempted sublation (*aufhebung*) of materialism and idealism that is best understood, as we shall see in the next chapter, through the lens of his Hegelian reading of Aristotle’s essentialism (Meikle 1985; cf MacIntyre 2008a). It was from this perspective that he disassociated his theory of history from both crude materialism and idealism (moralism).

“The chief defect of all hitherto-existing materialism,” he wrote, “is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradiction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such” (Marx 1975f, 422).

While this argument underpins Marx’s famous formal solution to the problem of structure and agency—“Men make history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted” (Marx 1973c, 146)—perhaps more importantly it illuminates the fundamental limitations of modern moral theory.

Contemporary Moral Discourse

The novelty of modern, post-Kantian, moral theory is perhaps best illuminated through a comparison with classical Greek conceptions of ethics. Greek ethics, especially as developed by Aristotle, was unlike modern moral philosophy in that it did not suppose that to be good entailed acting in opposition to our desires. Aristotle held to a naturalistic ethics, which related the idea of good to the fulfilment of human needs and desires (MacIntyre 1985, 122, 135). According to Aristotle the good is that “at which all things aim” and the good for man is *eudaimonia* (Aristotle 1976, 63). Literally translated this concept means something like being possessed of a “well-demon” or being “watched over by a good genius” (Knight 2007, 14; Ross 1949, 190). However, it is more usually, and usefully, rendered as happiness, well-being, self-realization, or flourishing. The latter of these translations perhaps gives the best sense of Aristotle’s meaning of *eudaimonia* as a way of life rather than a passing sensation, not a transitory psychological state but an “objective condition of a person” (Norman 1983, 39). In this model, the virtues are those qualities which enable social individuals to flourish as part of a community (MacIntyre 1985, 148). And because Aristotle recognized that humans are only able to flourish within communities—he defines us as “political animals”—he made a direct link between ethics and politics. The question of how we are to flourish lead directly to questions of what form of social and political community would best allow us to flourish. Consequently, as against those who would suggest an unbridgeable gulf between ethics and politics, as we noted in the introduction Aristotle declared the subject matter of his book on ethics to be politics (Aristotle 1976, 64; MacIntyre 1966, 57). More concretely, Aristotle was prescriptive in his model of happiness. He believed that each thing in the world has an end, or *telos*, that is some role which it is meant to play. So, just as, according to his pre-Darwinian biology, eyes have the end of seeing, humans have a specific end which differentiates us from the rest of nature and at which we must excel if we are to be truly happy. Uniquely amongst animals, or so Aristotle believed, humans have the power to contemplate eternal truths. Consequently, he surmised, at its best human happiness involves a life spent developing and using this faculty in line with the virtues (Ross 1949, 191). He therefore distinguished between contemplative activity and more mundane acts of production; associating *eudaimonia* with the former and not the latter. The intrinsic elitism of this argument

is all the more apparent when combined with his claim that the good life lived to its full was only open to those who had the leisure time to commit to a life of contemplation, and thus restricted to those who had the fortune to be born well, that is to be born a male member of an aristocratic family with enough wealth to underpin such an existence (Knight 2007, 26). Indeed, Aristotle's discussion of the virtues as the moderate mean between competing vices of extreme, at the peak of which is a virtue of magnanimity which by its very nature was only open to the rich, has led one commentator at least to label him a "supercilious prig" (MacIntyre 1966, 66). Nevertheless, if the substance of Aristotle's ethics is consequently colored by his own social location as a member of the elite of an elitist society—a type of "class-bound conservatism" in MacIntyre's opinion (MacIntyre 1966, 68)—its form implies much more radical conclusions, and indeed opens the door to a far-reaching critique of social relations. For instance, Kelvin Knight argues that the distinctions Aristotle draws between *theoria*, the contemplation of that which is eternal, *praxis*, the contemplation of those processes that are subject to human action, and *poiesis* or productive activity, are unstable, such that Aristotle's elitist conclusions are open to immanent critique from the standpoint of his own system (Knight 2007, 14ff; cf Nederman 2008). Nevertheless, beyond his elitism, Aristotle's account of what it is to flourish presupposes a pre-Darwinian model of human nature that is at odds with both modern liberal conceptions of individual egoism and Marx's historical humanism.

As opposed to Aristotle's social conception of individuality, liberal political theory has at its center a model of egoistic individualism. While this model is often assumed to be obviously true, the biological fact of our individuality should not be confused with the ideology of individualism, which was first systematically conceptualised in Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651).

According to Hobbes the central fact of human nature is a desire for self-preservation. From this physiological starting point he concludes that in a situation of material scarcity individuals tend to come into conflict with each other over resources resulting in a "war of all against all" (Hobbes 1998, esp. Ch. 13). He argues that, in this context, concepts such as good and bad relate to the need for self-preservation. Accordingly, the might of the individual becomes the basis for what is right. Since the seventeenth century, moral theory has attempted to escape the relativistic consequence of Hobbes' thought while continuing to accept something like his model of competitive individualism.

Marx points to a fundamental problem with this approach. He insists that to perceive oneself as an individual in opposition to society is a product of specifically modern social relations. The further one looks back into history, “the more does the individual . . . appear as dependent, as belonging to a greater whole.” Conversely, it is only in the eighteenth century, in the context of the newly emergent “civil society,” that social relations between people “confront the individual as mere means toward his private purposes, as external necessity.” One consequence of this fact is that “private interests,” assumed as fundamental in the ethics of both Kant and Hobbes, are in fact “already a socially determined interest, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society” (Marx, Karl 1973a, 156). Against the ahistorical assumption of the universality of modern egoistic individualism, Marx extended Aristotle’s claim that we are “political animals” to suggest that it is because of our “gregarious” nature that we are able to “individuate [ourselves] only in the midst of society,” and that this process occurs at a historically specific juncture (Marx 1973a, 84). This explains why, for instance, whereas in pre-capitalist societies individuals conceived themselves through mutual relations involving obligations, in modern capitalist society individuals appear “unconstrained by any social bonds” (MacIntyre 1966, 121–128).

Engels claims that in the medieval period, despite the fact that the bulk of peasant production and appropriation was carried out individually, local bonds of solidarity amongst feudal Europe’s peasantry were underpinned by those forms of communal land which the peasantry needed in order to survive and which helped them resist lordly power (Engels 1972, 123, 216; Anderson 1974, 148). By contrast, the emergence and eventual domination of capitalist market relations has resulted in production becoming socialized while appropriation remains individualized (Engels 1947, 327–8). This generates a contradictory relationship. Socialized production means that humans depend for their very existence upon a massive web of connections through each other, whereas individual appropriation implies that these individuals confront each other merely as competitors. Modern moral theory arose against the background of this contradiction. Thus, whereas pre-modern thinkers had assumed that because people are social animals, individuals cannot be understood except as part of society, modern moral theory is confronted by the reality of society but can only conceive it negatively as a series of Hobbesian competitors.

Social contract theory, utilitarianism, Kantianism, deconstruction, and even modern virtue ethics can all be understood as attempts to provide an answer to the problem of how to formulate a common good in a world of egoistic individuals. Though Marx's criticisms of morality involve a rejection of these approaches, he follows Kant in putting human freedom at the center of his social theory, whilst arguing that Kant fails to understand real human freedom.

In Hobbes' version of the social contract, self-interested individuals would, in a hypothetical situation, agree to the rule of an absolute sovereign as the best way to guarantee their self-preservation. Although later contract theorists such as John Locke and more recently John Rawls have rejected Hobbes' (conservative) political conclusions, they continue to accept his (liberal) way of framing the question. How, they ask, can self-interested individuals agree to some moral and political order?

A similar problematic stands at the center of the dominant mode of English moral philosophy over the last couple of centuries: utilitarianism. Originating with Jeremy Bentham's defense of the principle of utility or greatest happiness, this approach aimed at providing a scientific basis for reforming society so as to ensure that the greatest number of individuals achieve the greatest pleasure for the least pain. Bentham argued that as "nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pleasure and pain," it is these two sensations that provide not only "the standard of right and wrong," but also "govern us in all we do, in all we say, in all we think" (Bentham 1990, 9). He insisted that the principle of utility, or what is but another way of saying the same thing—the principle of greatest happiness, is that scientific approach by which we are able to restructure the social order so as to ensure that the greatest pleasure is provided for the greatest number of individuals for the least pain (Bentham 1990, 9–10). Bentham's community is a collection of individuals, and the importance of the concept of individuality to his moral theory cannot be overstated. He argued that it "is in vain to talk of the interest of the community, without understanding what is the interest of the individual" (Bentham 1990, 10). How, according to this model, can a plurality of pleasure seeking individuals avoid Hobbes' "war of all against all"?

An answer to this problem had been articulated by Adam Smith half a century earlier. Smith famously claimed that in a free market economy the general interest could emerge, not from the good intentions of individual actors, but rather as a consequence of the interaction of

a plurality of individuals pursuing their own selfish individual interests. Although it might be true, he argued, that concrete individual businessmen act selfishly; the consequences of these actions are improvements to the common good.

He generally, indeed, neither intends to promote the public interest, nor knows how much he is promoting it. By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was not part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.
(Smith 1994, 484–485)

Smith’s “invisible hand” provided a powerful consequentialist foundation upon which later thinkers were able to construct a utilitarian justification of capitalism. However, just as Smith naturalized the capitalist economy and capitalist individualism (Rubin 1979, pp. 167–175), at the core of their moral theory the classical utilitarians posited the existence of reified individuals whose desires were not only assumed to be unproblematically registered in the marketplace, but were also accepted as the proper basis for a moral community. Thus in a development of Bentham’s ideas, John Stuart Mill argued that according to utilitarianism the only thing that is desirable as an end is happiness, and the only evidence that something is desirable is that “people do actually desire it” (Mill 1991, p. 168). By thus equating what is good with what people desire, Mill, or so G. E. Moore argued, committed “as naïve and artless a use of the naturalistic fallacy as anybody could desire” (Moore 1990, 21). While this is true, as will become apparent below, the key problem with Mill’s argument is not his derivation of ought from is, but his assumption that our needs can be adequately registered through the alienated medium of the marketplace. Mill’s approach is innocent both of the ways in which our desires are malleable, and of the fact that just because people are happy with their lot does not entail “that their lot is what it ought to be” (MacIntyre 1966, 237). Moreover, because markets have no mechanism

for registering social desires, it is only by looking to those social forces that challenge these alienated relationships that we can begin to conceptualize a link between what is right and what is desired. In contrast to this, Bentham and Mill suggested that by our actions we show that we desire these benefits, that they make us happy, and that therefore they are good. Consequently, as Rawls pointed out, by defining the good “independently from the right” such that the right is defined as that which “maximises the good” it is not difficult to see why utilitarianism acts as a “tacit background” belief within contemporary society (Rawls 1971, 25; Kymlicka 2002, 10). It is no less obvious that it is an inadequate basis from which to articulate a satisfactory theory of social action in the modern world.

By focusing on the ends of actions rather than the means through which these ends are brought about, the broader family of consequentialist morality of which utilitarianism forms a part, is necessarily, in the words of Elizabeth Anscombe, “a shallow philosophy,” because for them “the question ‘What is it right to do in such-and-such circumstances?’ is a stupid one to raise” (Anscombe 1981, 36). The idea that our unmediated desires can act as a basis for the good life is fundamentally problematic. For, desires both change over time and exist as pluralities which do not necessarily pull in the same direction. We therefore must choose between them, and on these types of choices consequentialism has very little of interest to say. Indeed, by its focus on the ends of action, utilitarianism downplays just that aspect of our practice which is centrally important to moral theory: the means through which we aim to realize our ends. This lacuna goes a long way to explaining how, despite its radical roots, this approach has been used to justify all manner of inhuman acts in the name of their future consequences (MacIntyre 1964), and by conflating happiness with increased wealth it is blind to the way that modern societies generate so much unhappiness (Ferguson 2007; cf Frank 1999, Ch. 10; and Wilkinson 2005).

By far and away the most important alternative to utilitarianism and consequentialism is Kant’s approach to morality. Indeed, to the extent that modern morality is typically understood as a series of strictures which are supposed to govern our conduct, the most sophisticated attempt to provide a rational justification for such a model was articulated by Kant. As Alasdair MacIntyre notes, “for many who have never heard of philosophy, let alone of Kant, morality is roughly what Kant said it was” (MacIntyre 1966, 190).

Following the Greeks, Kant divided philosophy into three parts: logic, physics, and ethics. Logic, he argued, was that formal aspect of philosophy whose domain was the nature of reason itself: it was concerned with *a priori* reasoning rather than with the empirical investigation of the real world. By contrast, because both physics and ethics deal with the material world they each involve empirical reasoning (Kant 1948, 53). Nonetheless, as physics and ethics deal with different parts of the material world, their methods are very different. Physics, according to Kant, is that aspect of philosophy whose subject is the natural world, whereas ethics involves the philosophical attempt to understand and guide our actions as free rational agents. While the overlap between physics and ethics is obvious—we are natural beings with natural needs and desires—it is less obvious why their methods should differ. He justified his attempt to conceptualize the differing approaches of these two parts of philosophy by reference to the limitations of our theoretical knowledge of the real world.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant attempted to move beyond Humean scepticism by suggesting a transcendental method of argument which explained how scientists are able to move from empirical observations about the appearance of the world to suppositions about its essence or in his terms about the nature of the thing-in-itself. Nevertheless, he believed that because we are able to posit mutually contradictory yet equally plausible propositions about the thing-in-itself, there exist insurmountable limitations to our knowledge of it (Kant 1948, 111). The equally viable yet contradictory propositions or antinomies include, most importantly for our purposes, Kant's third antinomy between the assumptions that our actions are the product of free will and the assumption that they are conversely the necessary consequence of causal laws of nature (Kant 1933, 409ff). To the extent that our behavior is governed by natural laws, Kant proposed that it be understood via a branch of physics. However, he argued that because humans can be distinguished from the rest of nature by our possession of the faculty of reason, we should conceive our actions not as the effects of some natural laws, but as freely, autonomously chosen consequences of reasoned decisions (Kant 1948, 107ff). Thus, Kant suggests, the existence of a chasm between moral and natural laws—that is, between duty and desire.

Underpinning Kant's aim of disassociating morality or duty from human nature or inclination is his belief that our nature was essentially selfish. If Hobbes had asked how it was possible to "turn a state of war

into a state of order and peace,” Kant extended this question to ask how competitive individuals might mutually relate in a respectful manner (Reiss 1991, 10). As Allen Wood argues, according to Kant, “in society our inclinations, as expressions of competitive self-conceit, are inevitably a counter-weight to the moral law, which requires strength to overcome it” (Wood 2005, 149). For Kant, the moral law consists, as it did for the Protestant tradition in which he was raised, in essence as a series of limitations on or impediments to the actualization of our selfish and sinful desires. It was for this reason that he could not accept Aristotle’s naturalistic approach to ethics: our selfish nature suggests that our needs cannot underpin a moral order. Indeed, the modern claim that there is no necessary connection between statements of fact (*is*) and value judgements (*ought*) is underpinned by this claim.

Because Kant sought to give theoretical rigor to existing moral opinion, his thought has been labelled “an essentially conservative view” (MacIntyre 1966, 191). This is, however, no mere contingent fact of his personal moral preferences; rather it follows from the fact that the categorical imperative—the universal moral law which reason teaches us we should freely follow—is a fundamentally negative law. As Alasdair MacIntyre has argued, Kant tells us what we should not do—we should not lie, or break promises, for instance, because if these acts were universalized then society would collapse into chaos—but not what we should do. Because of this, his doctrine is necessarily “parasitic upon some already existing morality” (MacIntyre 1966, 197). Specifically, Kant’s ethics rest upon the common moral assumptions of his age. Indeed, the starting point for his moral theory is, according to Paton, “the provisional assumption that our ordinary moral judgements may legitimately claim to be true” (Paton 1948, 15). Thus, rather ironically, despite his insistence on the universality of the moral law, his own moral beliefs clearly have a historical (and, to the modern reader, disquieting) character. Wood points out that “Kant notoriously held some very extreme (even repellent) positions on certain ethical issues.” For instance, “[h]e held that murderers should always be put to death, that suicide is contrary to a strict duty to yourself, that sexual intercourse is inherently degrading to our humanity, that masturbation is an even more serious moral crime than suicide, that no disobedience to duly constituted political authority is ever justifiable except when the authority orders you to do something that is itself wrong, and he once argued that lying for the purpose of adding to human welfare, even to save the life of an innocent person from a would-be murderer, is always wrong” (Wood 2005, 130).

Kant's conservatism is therefore manifest at two levels: first, he substantively held to a series of what most people today would consider conservative moral opinions; but second, and much more importantly if MacIntyre is right, this was no accidental reflection of influences of the milieu from which he wrote. The nature of his thought meant that he was compelled to look to the world around him to give positive substance to his morality, and therefore there exists a tendency for him and his followers to bend their views toward the dominant, conservative, morality of the order in which they lived.

Nevertheless, Kant offered much more than a moral justification for the status quo. Because he put the humane treatment of others at the center of moral philosophy, his ethics have appealed to many who would not otherwise share his substantive moral commitments. According to one of his formulations, to act in line with the categorical imperative meant to “[a]ct in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end” (Kant 1948, 91). One need only glance at this statement for a moment to grasp the power of its appeal to generations of radicals, who, like the Austro-Marxist Max Adler, could agree that “Kant’s ethic represents a philosophical expression of the human aims of socialism” (Adler 1978, 63). However, herein lies another problem with Kant’s approach: if both radicals and conservatives have been able to embrace his formulation of the categorical imperative, it appears that his theory of how we ought to act fails, ironically, to provide a concrete guide to action. This was the censure levelled at Kant by Hegel, who criticized the abstract nature of Kant’s morality, which he characterized at one point by its “sublime hollowness and uniquely consistent vacuity” (Lukács 1975, 287; Taylor 1975, 371; cf Hegel 1952, 89–90). More generally, Hegel argued that Kant’s standpoint, that is the moral standpoint, far from being the perspective of pure reason, reflected in fact “the ethical life of the bourgeois or private individual.” Thus Kant understood “man” in abstraction not only from his natural needs and desires but also, in Wood’s words, the “individual’s role in ethical life,” was understood “in abstraction from the whole of which it is a part” (Wood 1990, 132).

For all his formalism, Kant had recourse to the traditional Aristotelian concept of happiness when discussing the ends of our actions. He asserts, in MacIntyre’s words, that it “would be intolerable if in fact duty were not in the end crowned with happiness.” But this proposition makes a tacit link, despite what he writes elsewhere on the subject, between the

concept of duty and the concept of human nature (MacIntyre 1966, 196). According to Robert Solomon, by thus suggesting that moral acts should not be executed in the name of happiness, but that happiness should be their reward, Kant generates a paradox which he nowhere resolves (Solomon 1983, 568). So despite Kant's good man being, in the words of Nietzsche, "the emasculated man, the man who has no desires" (Solomon 1983, 487), he ultimately finds it impossible to write on morality without some reference to the fulfilment of our desires.

Commenting on Hegel's criticisms of Kant, Lucien Goldmann suggests that "it is not Kant's ethic which is an empty form but that of actual man in bourgeois individualist society." He argues that Kant is right to suggest that there is a limit to practical egoism, for even the most evil or selfish men recognize the existence of a "universal moral law," even when they disregard it. The problem for Kant is that by assuming bourgeois individualism, he is compelled to conclude that the universal moral community posited by the categorical imperative can only exist at a formal rather than at a real level: our needs and desires are naturalized as the needs and desires of atomized competitive individuals, and therefore there is no social basis for acting as he believed we should act except by way of some duty which acted against our needs and desires (Goldmann 1971, 174). From this bourgeois perspective moral theories tend to view morality and community as top-down impositions on people. And whereas conservatives embrace this authoritarianism, anarchists and liberals tend either to reject or seek to ameliorate it.

Because modern (liberal) moral theory tends to transpose into the distant past the latest manifestation of human nature (Ramsey 1997, 7–8, 12, 32–37), it effectively acts to naturalize the modern capitalist context within which both it and individualism emerged (Ramsay 1997, 7; Cf Archibald 1993, 45–56; Williams 1976, 133–136). Milton Fisk argues that it is difficult to overstate the importance of this perspective. For, in satisfying personal rather than social interests, the capitalist market is a mechanism which forces actors to relate "in a way that ignores any social links they may have." Markets therefore tend to obscure the social aspect of human nature, and this limitation is carried over into liberalism's "impoverished" model of human nature. One consequence of this facet of liberalism is that when liberals confront concrete ethical issues—Fisk gives the example of the debate on abortion rights—they tend to explain these conflicts superficially in terms of personal interests and values without enquiring as to the social roots of these preferences and

values. More generally, it is liberalism's impoverished theory of human nature which underpins the substantive relativism of contemporary moral discourse. By pointing to the social basis of liberalism, Fisk argues, Marx points beyond the seemingly intractable character of debates such as these within contemporary political philosophy (Fisk 1989, 275–288).

If modern capitalist social relations underpin the inherent conceptual weaknesses in liberal approaches to morality, they also tend to undermine the virtues which helped reproduce pre-capitalist communities. In a critical discussion of Marxism, Alasdair MacIntyre has argued that although some of the evils endemic to the modern world arise in part from the character of those who commit them, others are generated by the “gross inequalities in the initial appropriation of capital” which bequeath a structural injustice to the labour market through the exploitative relations thus generated. However, the vices of capitalism go beyond this, for capitalism not only reproduces this exploitative system, it also “miseducates” people to perceive themselves primarily as consumers, for whom “success in life” is increasingly judged through the medium of the “successful acquisition of consumer goods.” Consequently, whereas *pleonexia*, the drive to have more and more, was understood by Aristotle to be the very vice that was the counterpart of the virtue of justice, in bourgeois society it has itself become a virtue. This inversion of virtue and vice in turn “provides systematic incentives to develop a type of character that has a propensity to injustice.” Consequently, MacIntyre suggests, the malicious character traits noted above are themselves reinforced by capitalist relations of production (MacIntyre 1995, xiii–xvi; 1985, 137; 2006, 39).

Capitalist social relations, according to both Fisk and MacIntyre, therefore inform not only liberalism's inherent moral relativism via its impoverished theory of human nature, but also reproduce the type of egoistic individualism which undermines those practices through which virtuous communities might emerge. And by naturalizing modern individualism and the capitalist social relations which underpin it, liberalism is unable to conceive of the transcendence of the system which undermines both the reproduction of virtuous behavior and the elaboration of an agreed-upon set of standards by which we should live. Furthermore, it offers a tacit apology for capitalism's characteristic power relationship. Jeffrey Reiman comments that liberal assumptions about the atomized, asocial, and ahistorical character of individualism act to smuggle into the supposed disinterested reason of modern moral theory the interests

of those who benefit from the reproduction of modern, capitalist, social relations (Reiman 1991, 147).

While Kant's aim was to provide a universally valid argument for obeying the moral law, because we reason from concrete perspectives (MacIntyre 2008j, 314), in a fragmented world of competing interests reason itself tends to become fragmented into so many competing arguments for different visions of what is right. So, modern moral philosophers can agree, for example, that the world is an incredibly socially unequal place, but disagree as to whether or not this is a desirable situation. For instance, contemporary political philosophy is dominated by a debate between libertarians such as Robert Nozick who excuse social inequalities by defending private property rights and egalitarians such as John Rawls who justify such inequalities only insofar as they "benefit the least advantaged" (Callinicos 2000, 36–87). In a classic commentary on this historical roots of this situation, Alasdair MacIntyre points to the rational core of Nietzsche's universal nihilism as a false ahistorical generalization from a real characteristic of bourgeois society (MacIntyre 1985, 113): it is impossible from the standpoint of civil society for moral perspectives to escape the relativistic parameters of "emotivism"—the belief that the phrase "this is good" can essentially be translated as "I approve of it" (MacIntyre 1985, 12). This explains both the intractability of these debates, and the fact that moral and political philosophy tends to be a graveyard for political practice. By suggesting that there is no way of agreeing about the kind of world we should live in, these debates undermine any positive model of a better world and therefore tend to act as a tacit apology for the status quo (Reiman 1991, 147).

The deconstructive turn in ethical theory can be understood as but the latest variant of this tendency to moral relativism. Both Levinas and Derrida share with Kant a conception of morality as duty, because like their liberal forebear they reject ethical naturalism, and alongside contemporary liberalism deconstruction tends toward a trite celebration of multiculturalism (Eagleton 2009, 223, 241, 247). Simon Critchley argues that because deconstruction starts not from abstract universality but from concrete particularity, a conception of duty derived from Levinas and Derrida is able to escape Hegel's critique of Kant's formalism (Critchley 1999, 41, 48). However, as Terry Eagleton points out, far from escaping the limits of Kantianism, deconstruction deepens them. He suggests that one of the ironies of the academic left's movement toward postmodernism since the 1980s is that it combined the decon-

struction of the concepts of the autonomous individual subject and of universal reason alongside a return to Kantian ethical concerns. One consequence of this contradictory movement is that whereas Kant's moral theory presupposed as its point of departure the reasoning individual who was able to come to some universally valid moral conclusions, the poststructuralists' deconstruction of these concepts led them toward locating the moral law in "sheer arbitrary rhetorical force" (Eagleton 1993, 129; 2003, 152–3). More specifically, deconstruction's focus on the concept of the other has led to an extreme form of relativism which can if taken seriously, according to David Harvey, lead to the conclusion that "it would be just as unjust to try to override the cultural achievements of slavery, apartheid, fascism, or caste society as it would be to deny the rights to self-determination of native-Americans or Vietnamese peasants" (Harvey 1996, 351).

One attempt to escape this predicament involves a return to classical (Greek) virtue ethics (Slote 1997). Instead of focusing on the intentions of actors or the consequences of actions, virtue ethicists insist that the key ethical question should be "what kind of person ought I be?" While Aristotle was able to answer this question through reference to his pre-Darwinian model of human nature, an adequate modern virtue ethics must be rooted in a model of human nature that is compatible with Darwin without succumbing to the reductive temptations of social Darwinism. It was Hegel who first pointed toward a solution to this dilemma by suggesting a historical model of human essence.

Ethics beyond Aristotle and Kant

Despite their profound differences both modern and classical conceptions of ethics tend to naturalize the very different social contexts in which they were formulated (MacIntyre 1985, 159). Hegel's great contribution to moral theory was grounded in his historical comparison of these two contexts: he asked how and why moderns are different from ancient Greeks. By doing this he began a process, later completed by Marx, of synthesizing and overcoming the limitations of both Kantian morality and Aristotelian ethics.

As we will see in the next chapter, while Marx shared with Kant the idea that freedom was the essence of humanity, he also insisted upon the concrete natural and historical form taken by that freedom. This

alternative to the reified conceptions of humanity common to much of modern moral philosophy drew upon the works of both Aristotle and Hegel. And if we follow Knight's suggestion that Aristotle's substantive elitism is open to an immanent critique from the standpoint of his own system, it is rather beside the point to claim, as does Rodney Peffer, that Marx's views on morality cannot be "completely assimilated to Aristotle's": the issue is rather that their methods converge in important ways (Peffer 1990, 102; Gilbert 1984, 155). For if humans have an essence, and if the aim of human life is to realize the potential of this essence, it follows that social structures which impede this should be challenged (Eagleton 1997, 17–33). Indeed, Richard Miller points out that Marx's theory of alienation recalls Aristotle's "description of deprivations which . . . would deny people a good life" (Miller 1989, 178; 1984, 76ff; cf Wood 1981, 126).

According to Allen Wood, Hegel's contribution to ethical theory is perhaps best understood as an attempt to synthesize the most powerful elements of Kant's and Aristotle's thought (Wood 1990, 7). Just as Aristotle sought to base his ethics on a model of human essence, Hegel insisted that ethics must start from a model of "what human beings *are*," for it is only when they are so grounded that they are able to say "that some modes of life are suited to our nature, whereas others are not" (Wood 1990, 17, 32). Nevertheless, while Hegel follows Aristotle in assuming that the goal of life is self-realization, he broke with him in a typically modern way by recognizing that it is only by way of freedom that this is possible. Consequently, whereas Aristotle insisted that happiness is the end of life, Hegel believed that the end of life was freedom (Wood 1990, 20, 33). Moreover, by linking the pursuits of happiness and freedom—for instance when he wrote that "the moral consciousness cannot forgo happiness"—Hegel suggested a solution to the paradox characteristic of Kant's morality noted above, whereby Kant believed that to act from a sense of duty meant repressing our desires but also that by thus acting we would be rewarded with happiness (Solomon 1983, 568).

For Hegel, to act freely involved acting in accordance with necessity, that is, in line with our human needs and desires (Lukács 1975, 354; Engels 1947, 140; Hegel 1956, 26; Adorno 1973, 249). He therefore criticized "Kant for seeing dichotomies in the self between freedom and nature . . . where he ought to have seen freedom as actualizing nature" (Wood 1990, 70). He believed that moral laws, far from being

universal in a transhistorical sense, are in fact only intelligible “in the context of a particular community,” and are universalizable only in the historical sense that “communities grow and consolidate into an international community” (Solomon 1983, 480–481). Indeed, Robert Solomon points out that when someone claims to act out of conscience, according to Hegel they are in fact engaged in behavior that is in line with beliefs which “echo” those of the moral community of which they are a part (Solomon 1983, 577). Hegel called this unity of the subjective and objective aspects of ethics in social life *Sittlichkeit*, or ethical life, which he understood to encompass both social institutions and “subjective dispositions” (Wood 1990, 196). Through this concept Hegel pointed to the social content to the idea of freedom by relating it to the movement of “a living social whole” (Lukács 1975, 153). Specifically, whereas liberals embrace an ahistorical conception of human nature, Hegel historicized the concept of essence by conceptualizing humans through their social relations. He nevertheless immunized his thought against possible relativistic consequences of this theoretical movement by reserving the idea of ethical life for those social orders that rationally articulated the relationship between the community and the freedom of the individual (Wood 1990, 205, 208). In this way he worked a dramatic change on Aristotle’s conceptualization of happiness. For if there is an important sense in which human nature evolves with the cultural evolution of communities, then so too does the concept of self-realization. Wood consequently labels Hegel’s theory as a form of “dialectical or historicised naturalism” (Wood 1990, 33). From this perspective, Hegel partially accepts Kant’s argument that ethical norms be used as standards which act as a constraint on our desires. However, as opposed to Kant, he also argues that duties need not merely be things I ought to do but can in certain circumstances be things, in Wood’s words, “I spontaneously want to do.” Indeed, he insists that the good only truly becomes good when it is reconciled with our desires (Wood 1990, 210, 214). This approach involved a conception of desire that was both historical and critical, and therefore a conception of essence which escaped the abstractions of liberal political theory.

Unfortunately, if the great strength of Hegel’s ethics was his attempt to overcome the opposition between Aristotle and Kant through a historicized conception of essence, his own positive account of the institutions through which the freedom of moderns could be realized was far from persuasive (MacIntyre 1966, 209). This reflected, as Marx suggested,

a deeper limitation with his thought: despite his nominally historicized conception of essence, because he conceived the self-transformative labour at the core of his theory of history as intellectual labour while accepting the political economists' ahistorical conception of productive labour, in practice he was unable, as Chris Arthur comments, to "see beyond the horizon of capitalism" (Arthur 1986, 68). Consequently, according to Lukács, although Hegel criticised "the narrow and confined character of Kant's moral doctrine, he does not manage to surpass this limitation himself" (Lukács 1980a, 71). This contrasts with Marx's standpoint, which as we shall argue in the next chapter allowed him to recognize the specifically capitalist nature of alienation and therefore the anti-capitalist implications of the struggle for freedom. It is because Hegel conceived history as the history of consciousness rather than as the practical transformation of the world and humanity through productive labour he was ultimately unable either to "make a radical critique of the real world of estrangement" or to point to its "practical objective transformation" (Arthur 1986, 61).

The Crisis of Modern Moral Theory

The problem of how one might live a virtuous life in a world in which community and the virtues are constantly undermined by the rule of capital has taxed some of the most important moral philosophers of the twentieth century. Commenting on the culture in which deontological and consequentialist approaches to morality dominate, Elizabeth Anscombe famously argued that whereas consequentialism is obviously inadequate as a theory claiming to guide our actions, contemporary moral discourse more generally—that is morality understood in broadly Kantian terms—continues in the shadow of a past moral framework, but without the belief in a law-giving deity through which such an approach might be justified.

To have a *law* conception of ethics is to hold that what is needed for conformity with the virtues failure in which is the mark of being bad *qua* man (and not merely, say, *qua* craftsman or logician)—that what is needed for *this*, is required by divine law. Naturally it is not possible to have such a conception unless you believe in God as a law-giver;

like Jews, Stoics, and Christians. But if such a conception is dominant for many centuries, and then is given up, it is a natural result that the concepts of “obligation,” of being bound or required as by a law, should remain though they had lost their root; and if the word “ought” has become invested in certain contexts with the sense of “obligation,” it too will remain to be spoken with a special emphasis and special feeling in these contexts. (Anscombe 1981, 30)

This argument greatly influenced Alasdair MacIntyre’s claim, noted above, that in the modern world ethics has become but a “simulacra of morality,” characterised by interminable debates where the arguments presented by either side are “incommensurable” while purporting to present “impersonal rational arguments,” which in fact are premised upon a variety of distinct historical antecedents (MacIntyre 1985, 8–10).

In an early review of Rawls’ *A Theory of Justice*, MacIntyre claimed that despite the undoubted power of Rawls’ arguments, his thesis was undermined by his unwitting confusion of general and historically specific characteristics of human rationality: the “initial situation” which Rawls deployed as a convenient analytical tool from which to imagine “rational agents” agreeing upon the basic structure of society reflected not some pristine human rationality but a bias toward modern bourgeois individuality (MacIntyre 1972; 1988, 133). Beyond smuggling a bias toward bourgeois individualism into his moral theory, Rawls smuggled more specific aspects of his own egalitarianism into his first principles. While there was much that was subsequently persuasive about Rawls’ arguments, these tacit assumptions would act as the Achilles’ heel of his arguments, undermining their appeal to all who did not share his starting point.

More generally, MacIntyre argues that in the contemporary world, though we continue to use many of the concepts associated with classical ethical theory, these concepts have been unhinged from the social context in which they once made sense. It is as if, he argues, some dramatic catastrophe was to overcome our world, the consequences of which included the destruction of our existing scientific culture, right down to the teaching of elementary science in schools. Assuming that a movement arose in the wake of this event which sought to reinstitute science, but in a world without scientists or even a basic knowledge of science and with only a few fragments of surviving scientific texts, the

resultant *pot pourri* of decontextualized snippets of scientific knowledge would be but a pathetic parody of the original, now lost, culture. Similarly, he argues that whereas conceptions of good and bad, etc. once had definite meanings within classical literature, today they have become disembodied. For instance, MacIntyre argues that Homer believed that to be good was to play a particular social role well—thus it would have been meaningless to ask “was he a good man?” in some generic sense rather than was he a good athlete/king/soldier, etc. in a sense that is partly comparable to modern questions such as “is she a good electrician?” It follows that to be virtuous involves work toward excelling in your social role. For Aristotle, the moral question has changed but is still recognizably related to Homer’s. To be good, from his perspective, is to be a good citizen of the polis, and this involves carrying out some specific socially accepted role as part of the polis. In both of these cases the separation of facts and values does not exist in the way that it does within, and in large part defines, modern moral theory. MacIntyre suggests that where there had once been socially accepted norms, there exists today a cacophony of incommensurable moral perspectives which can be reduced to more or less coherent expressions of personal preferences (MacIntyre 1985, 122, 135).

Developing this argument, MacIntyre claims that Marx was “right when he argued against the English trade unionists of the 1860s that appeals to justice were pointless, since there are rival conceptions of justice formed by and informing the life of rival groups.” Furthermore, although he was mistaken in his belief that contestations over the nature of justice were secondary social phenomena, he was “fundamentally right in seeing conflict and not consensus at the heart of modern social structure”: “modern politics is civil war carried out by other means.” Interestingly, MacIntyre argues that the pervasiveness of these conflicts in the modern world was classically expressed in the work of Nietzsche (MacIntyre 1985, 19, 113, 250, 252–3). However, he claims that Nietzsche’s perspective on the world is best understood not, as Nietzsche himself would have it, as a radical alternative to eighteenth and nineteenth century liberal individualist ethical thinkers, but rather as a “representative moment in [the] internal unfolding” of this system of thought. As an alternative to the worldview which culminated in Nietzsche, MacIntyre suggests that some form of Aristotelianism is able both to account for the impasse of liberal individualism and to offer the basis for an alternative tradition through which we might restate our “moral and social attitudes and