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Marx, Aristotle and Beyond:
Aspects of Aristotelianism in Marxist Social Ontology

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Ph.D. Thesis

Glasgow University

Faculty of Social Sciences

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Here my chaste Muse a liberty must take -
Start not! Still chaster reader - she'll be nice hence -
Forward, and there is no great cause to quake;
This liberty is a poetic licence
Which some irregularity may make
In the design, and as I have a high sense
Of Aristotle and the Rules, 'tis fit
To beg his pardon when I err a bit.¹

¹ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto 1, 120

Abstract

Marx's debt to Aristotle has been noted, but inadequately. Usually commentators focus on the parallels between discrete ethical theories of both writers. However, for Marx, ethics is not a discrete field, but is founded on a conception of social ontology. This thesis links the two by showing that, precisely because of its Aristotelian roots, Marx's political economy of bourgeois society demands an ethical view arising from alienated labour. Marx conceives of bourgeois society as an organic whole. But this entails that its social matter can only exist potentially, and not fully, setting up a tension that points to the eventual supercession of its social form. In this manner, Marx's Aristotelian hylomorphism provides the link between the early and the later Marx, between the critique of alienation and the mature works of political economy.

This reading of Marx is facilitated by combining it with recent developments in philosophy. The work of Harré, Kripke and Wiggins, in particular have helped retrospectively to justify Marx's intuitive realism. Their contributions on explanation, identity and sortals are applied in order to elucidate and justify his ontology. In the course of this, the problematic boundary between analytical philosophy and social theory is crossed.

Marx restates ancient beliefs about the transitory nature of existence and the eternal nature of change. In particular, there are strong parallels between Marx's account of the decline and eventual fall of capitalism, and the Aristotelian message that all sublunary entities come to be and pass away. These parallels are sufficiently striking to allow us to recognise that Marx's account of the crisis ridden and ultimately doomed perspective for capitalism, overlooked by his protagonists, is but a variant of the Aristotelian theory of passing away or *phthorá*.

Finally, two attempts to redraw Marx's ontology are discussed. The first is the critique offered by Elster. This is shown to be at variance with Marx's ontology, and itself confused. Lukács' *Social Ontology of Social Being* is, on the other hand, unjustifiably neglected. Though vitiated politically by his Stalinism, and philosophically by its failure to embrace a clear principle of individuation, it is an important work, re-establishing the link between ontology and ethics.

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INTRODUCTION

THE CRISIS OF MARXISM AND MARX INTERPRETATION

The 'crisis of Marxism' as an intellectual and political project has been brought to a head by the collapse of the regimes in Russia and Eastern Europe towards the end of this century. These events were overwhelmingly interpreted as entailing the end of the significance not only of 'Communism' but also of Marx's thought. So it may seem odd, or just a retracing of old ground to go back to Marx and seek to offer another interpretation of his thought and his system. One motivation for attempting such a task is a nagging unease at the amalgamation of Marx, Engels Lenin, and the rulers of the Soviet Union into a more or less continual thread. So one reason for looking at and thinking about Marx's writings in a specifically philosophical way is to see whether it is possible to disentangle Marx from the actions carried out in his name. This does not involve simply posing nineteenth century texts against twentieth century reality: the Marx corpus admits of a huge range of quotation mongering, and Soviet disputes were continually carried out under the cloak of gestures towards his written authority. More important is asking whether Marx could have accepted the sort of 'spin' put on his work by the theorists of the CPSU. 'Could have' is a tricky modality, but it is the only one available. Assessing what Marx could and could not have done, involves looking at some of the hidden structures of Marx's thought and system, or systems, to establish the limits that such structures placed on what he could and could not have argued.

This is not to say that it is only as a result of philosophical misunderstandings that *soi disant* Marxists established and maintained some of the most brutal and inhuman regimes in human history. The task is not to relieve Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao of their responsibility for the many millions of deaths that they directly and indirectly caused, by suggesting that if they had only understood Marx's conception of contradiction, or whatever, they would have behaved differently. The relationship between theory and practice is nothing like that close. Rather the task is to see whether or not Marx's writings are implicated in their actions; it will become clear in the course of this work that I hold that such a connection cannot be sustained.

The Marxian positions that are motivated here, are emphatically humanist, and focussed on the conception of human potential as a motivating and driving force in human affairs. This feature of his thought, would have involved Marx in the most stringent critique, not only of the capitalist society in which he lived, but also of the authoritarian regimes of the next century to his, which themselves suppressed

and thwarted human potential in an arguably more vicious way than bourgeois society has ever done. But in defending Marx in this respect, by focussing on the concept of human potential, it is also necessary to defend his work from some of his interpreters in the realm of political theory, and to understand what it was that motivated his emancipatory vision. This is not a demand for the psycho history of a dead theorist. Nor is it an imperative to separate out a normative, ethical message that can stand alone, distinct from the specific and substantive analyses of capitalist and, as a poor second, the other social forms that Marx offered. In Marx's work the normative and the descriptive are entwined, in Aristotelian manner.

Recent studies such as those by Kain,¹ Wood,² and McCarthy,³ have noted the influence of Aristotelian principles on Marx's ethical positions and his account of the good life for man. This has followed from the widespread rejection of the idea that Marx simply did not have a moral position, an idea derived from the 'scientific socialism' of the Second International. But the recent revival of interest in Marx's moral position has led some commentators to go too far in the opposite direction by separating off his ethical view from his critique of political economy. One aim of this thesis is to re-integrate both the ethical critique that Marx offers of the imposed form of capitalist social relations and the seemingly utopian image that he held of a future communist society. This latter form, unlike the contingently imposed form of capitalism, is for Marx immanent in the social ontology that he offers, and that social ontology provides the foundation for his critical political economy. Unfortunately for later interpreters, that ontology, though implicit in his work, is at no point laid out in a formulaic manner. The reconstruction of that ontology is part of the argument offered here. In outlining that ontology, both as the 'bare' nature of existence of man, and as the nature of the existence of man in capitalist society, ethics and political economy are linked as an immanent critique of the current concrete existence of man.

The method of argument pursued in this thesis is to bring together different elements in Marx's thought, and then to compare the reconstructed framework to the accounts offered by other critics. In particular the ancient provenance of both Marx's ontology and his prescriptive message is brought out. This runs through his work from the very earliest *Doctoral Dissertation* on the Greek atomists, Democritus and Epicurus to what Engels referred to as the 'thick books' of

¹ Kain, P., *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford, 1988).

² Wood, A., *Karl Marx* (London, 1981).

³ McCarthy, G. E., *Marx and the Ancients; Classical Ethics, Social Justice and Nineteenth Century Political Economy* (Maryland, 1990).

political economy: *Capital*, the *Grundrisse der Politischen Ökonomie* and the notebooks collected as *Theories of Surplus Value*. In this manner it constitutes a unifying theme in the Marx canon. The assertion of a unifying theme itself is controversial, entailing a denial of the interpretation of Althusser who insists on an epistemological break in Marx between a humanist and a scientific problematic. The case for this has also been set out by Cowling who has suggested that Marx moved from a theory of alienation to a theory of the mode of production.⁴ Although this accurately indicates a change in the terrain of Marx's discussion, aspects of Aristotelian hylomorphism; the form/matter distinction, remain as a central organising concept in Marx's work. This distinction carries with it profound implications for the prescriptive/descriptive contrast alluded to above. I argue then for a critical integration of Marx's writing seen through the prism of his selective appropriation of aspects of the Aristotelian tradition. In the course of the thesis divergent interpretations of Marx are considered and an assessment is offered of them. Other sources are the recent writings in ontology particularly by Wiggins and the work on the theory of explanation and natural necessity by Harré and Madden. Additionally, interpretative work on Aristotle is considered.

My claim to originality, as against works that take a similar sort of line on Marx such as those by McCarthy, Wood, and Meikle⁵ is fourfold. Since Gould's *Marx's Social Ontology*⁶ little has been produced that focusses specifically on ontology, as opposed to Marx's ethics or his wider social theory. One exception is Meikle's work and its influence on this thesis will be clear. The general claim that Marx's work has a strong Aristotelian element is not new. What is new is the account here of the specific ways that the Aristotelian elements of Marx's ontology are utilised. I trace in greater depth the form/matter framework and the way that this acts as an explanatory device in Marx's earlier writings. Second, I provide a retrospective justification for Marx's approach, and an explanation of his underlying assumptions through an analysis of recent work in analytical philosophy that is either a critical response to, or inspired by, Aristotle. Thirdly, rather than constructing the ontology that Marx uses on an *a priori* basis, I reconstruct it through an interpretation of his anti-individualist methodology in the critique of the political economists of his day, particularly focussing on Ricardo and Bailey. This has consequences for Marx's understanding of the decay of capitalism, which parallels Aristotle's discussion of *phthorá*. Lastly, this ontology is wielded against

⁴ Cowling, C. M., 'The Case for Two Marxes Restated' in Cowling, C. M., and Wilde, L. (eds.), *Approaches to Marx* (Milton Keynes, 1989).

⁵ Meikle, S., *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (London, 1985).

⁶ Gould, C., *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).

two interpretations of Marx which ostensibly come from radically different standpoints; Elster's *Making Sense of Marx*⁷ and Lukács' *Ontology of Social Being*. The ontology outlined here is shown to have politico-theoretical implications, serving as a foil both to the individualistic account offered by Elster and to the account that is given by Lukács, ordered around the notion of totality. Paradoxically, both versions of Marx's social ontology can be as stultifying as each other for an authentic Marxian praxis. The originality of this thesis then exists in its attempt to integrate divergent sources from the history of ideas, analytical philosophy and contemporary social theory into an overall account of Marx's *Weltanschauung* and to point out the consequences of that view for critical interpretations of Marx.

It is necessarily the case that much in this account is speculative and provisional; these are murky waters. One aspect of the project of Analytical Marxism that has a strong resonance is the view held by its practitioners, that 'dialectical' interpretations of Marx often exhibit an opacity that is both disheartening to a reader trying to uncover a dialectical Marx, and that serves to cover up theoretical problems. The way around this, however, is not to reject Marx's distinctive methodology and ontology but to attempt to renegotiate precisely those aspects of his thought. In the course of this attempt the recourse to 'state of the art' techniques is to be welcomed. Nevertheless, one of the basic arguments here is that those state of the art techniques are best drawn from metaphysical argument, rather than the techniques of contemporary social science; rational choice, equilibrium analysis and methodological individualism. The central reason for this preference is simply that Marx explicitly rejects such approaches in his critique of political economy. A subsidiary reason is that the importing of such techniques flies in the face of the intellectual context of Marx's thought. Taken together, these considerations impel a reconstruction of Marx's thought that is in sympathy with its intellectual context and assesses it as, at the least likely to be coherent within that context. Elster concludes his book by saying that: 'It is not possible today, morally or intellectually, to be a Marxist in the traditional sense.'⁸ Not only do I wish to differ from Elster's account of what a Marxist in the traditional sense would look like, I also hold that that possibility remains open, that, in this respect at least, the crisis of Marxism is in principle resolvable, and that an integrative project such as the one offered here makes some small contribution to the task of doing social theory from a Marxist point of view.

To this end I begin by tracing some of the elements of Aristotelianism which Marx

⁷ Elster, J., *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁸ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 531.

encountered and embraced in the early 1840's and which later formed a skeletal explanatory structure for the development of his substantial theses. Like Aristotle, and unlike Descartes and the British empiricists such as Berkeley and Hume, Marx assumed the existence of an objective world, independent of thought. He was consequently concerned with an investigation of the sorts of things that that world contained and how its components behaved. Marx and Aristotle share a very basic assumption that we can speak meaningfully about that world, and that language use can reveal something about its nature. Because of this, both manifest an extension of their enquiries from material to social entities and both uses analogies between the world of middle sized material objects and the social world as explanatory devices. Because of shared commitments about the relation between language and the external world, they are freer with metaphors and analogies than writers who are more sceptical about knowledge claims. With this shared outlook in mind it is possible to proceed to an account of the central themes, which link on the one hand Aristotle's metaphysics, conception of society, and theory of the soul, and on the other, Marxian social ontology.

The first of these themes is the conception of substance. This is traced through its derivation in both the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics*. This becomes a guiding and systematising concept for Marx, especially in the critique of the work of Bailey which is elucidated in the *Theories of Surplus Value*.

Second, Aristotle's opposition to Plato's universals is examined. Its role, as a precursor to Marx's account of his own method and ontology, is introduced. This theme recurs in key passages such as the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*

Maintaining the focus on metaphysics, the issue of identity through change is considered, within an account, drawn from Aristotle, of the logic of accidental and substantial change. This is shown to be problematic in the case of composite substances, having both matter and form and this *paradox of unity* is resolved, following Gill's *Aristotle on Substance*,⁹ by considering matter in composites as potential matter. One social theoretic consequence of this interpretation is the explanatory priority of form, and the ontological priority of matter in composites such as social wholes.

Then, moving from the *Metaphysics* to the *Politics*, I look at Aristotle's account of the nature of the *polis* and its simultaneous correspondence to, and distance from, a conservative organic conception of social entities such as that offered by Burke.

⁹ Gill, M.L., *Aristotle on Substance* (Princeton, 1989).

I aim to show that there is a common core to these four elements, which emerges as the parallels between Marx and Aristotle become explicit. This common core lies in the conception of man and society as entities with certain characteristic forms of behaviour. This covers both the nature of man as a species-being and the nature of the social entities which men compose and is examined through an examination of Aristotle's *De Anima*.

Moving away from the direct application of Aristotle to look at recent work in metaphysics, I uncover some of the ontological presuppositions of two different conceptions of social inquiry. First, the Humean positing of the problem of induction is examined together with the ontological requirements of its supercession. Then I look at the Hegelian/idealist positing of reality as a totality comprised of internal relations which is strongly reflected in some Marxist analyses. Widely divergent though they are, both approaches fail to accommodate the need to pick out persisting and distinct social entities as a first step in the analysis of social reality. Through an examination of recent neo-Aristotelian work I outline fundamental problems in both such approaches. One of the key problems thrown up by the internal relations conception of reality is the possibility of individuation. In this context, via a consideration of Wiggins' work on a theory of individuation, it is possible to highlight the significance of the ontological accounts provided by Aristotelians. One great strength of this account is that it has been able to give an answer to the question 'What is X?' In many cases what X is, is a certain kind of thing, and I go on to give an account of the relation between law-like behaviour and membership of natural kinds. The nomological basis of natural kind terms illuminates Marx's distinction between essence and appearance, and the priority of behaviour to definition.

Marx's belief in the eventual supercession of capitalist society by a socialist form is also grounded in Aristotelian assumptions. Against Parmenides and Plato, Aristotle articulated a theory of coming to be and decay, which subtends Marx's analysis of the nature of bourgeois society. This analysis incorporates the 'special nature of labour'; that it is the revivifying and animating element in social existence. As a result, Marx's general social ontology has implications for his theory of the decay of capitalism, itself derived from Aristotelian positions.

This account of Marx's Aristotelian social ontology is then counterposed to an examination of two approaches to social theory and Marx interpretation which reflect first the Humean and second the internal relations views in philosophy: represented by the work of Jon Elster and Georg Lukács, in chapters eight and nine respectively.

CHAPTER ONE
MARXISM AND SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

There are unruly children and precocious children. Many of the old people belong to this category. The Greeks were normal children. The charm of their art for us is not in contradiction to the underdeveloped stage of society on which it grew. [It] is its result, rather, and is inextricably bound up, rather, with the fact that the unripe social conditions under which it arose, and could alone arise, can never return.¹

In the following chapter, first I outline the manner in which issues of ontology have been progressively moved into the background in the philosophical interpretation of Marx through the years following the Second World War. Within Marx studies, on either a broad or narrow interpretation of that label, issues of aesthetics or morality, political responsibility, and more narrowly focused social theory, including economic theory, have transplanted questions of the meaning of dialectics, or the relations between man and society. In contrast on a wider view of philosophical debate, developments in metaphysical discussion have reinvigorated the Aristotelian tradition. These developments have potential to reinvigorate Marxism, since they have rendered less credible some of the philosophical techniques that have been used to attack his thought. Marx himself was well versed in Aristotelianism, as is indicated by a discussion of both his general intellectual context and the particular sources consulted in preparation for his doctoral dissertation of 1838-41. Lessons learnt in this period formed a pivotal element in the development of his method. Key aspects of Marx's Aristotelian background are then outlined.

Marxist philosophy and ontological neglect

It may seem incongruous to begin discussion of Marx with Aristotle, though this is one symptom of the downgrading of metaphysical discussion in Marxian writing. Such downgrading has been a feature of intellectual development in the late twentieth century. For example, in his introduction to *Marxist Theory*, Alex Callinicos offers a chronology of Marxist philosophy which is a good approximation of the image that many will have in their heads: Hegelian Marxism, dominating the Western Marxism school, and associated particularly with Lukács and the Frankfurt school, was swept away by Althusser and structuralism which cleared, even razed, the ground and allowed it, refertilised, to be tilled by analytical Marxism. This was a development with its geographical

¹ Marx, K., *Grundrisse* translated with a foreword by M. Nicolaus (Harmondsworth, 1973) p. 111.

roots in the Anglo-Saxon world and its intellectual roots in the tradition of Analytical philosophy. Commentating on these developments, Callinicos himself welcomes them, and in particulate the break with Hegel:

[Althusser] established the incompatibility of historical materialism with the Hegelian modes of thinking previously adhered to by Marxist philosophers, and therefore the need to re-examine the basic principles of Marxism.²

One of several reasons to reject such a commendation of the development of thinking about Marx is that in the course of each of these developments, questions of ontology have been progressively downgraded, and are virtually absent in the canonical works of Analytical Marxism. Even in this, the newest paradigm, there exists a curious distance from Analytical *philosophy* in favour of an analysis of exploitation displacing the labour theory of value,³ a functional model of historical materialism,⁴ and a game theoretic reconstruction of disparate Marxian insights.⁵ Robert Ware notices this in his comments on one of the classical texts of analytical Marxism, Jon Elster's *Making Sense of Marx* which, he notes, has 'virtually nothing to say about analytical Marxist philosophers other than Cohen and indeed does not even include most of the philosophical works ... in his long bibliography.'⁶ There are, naturally enough, reasons for this, which I go into in further detail in Chapter Eight, below. What becomes clear is that although Elster has a conception of ontology, it has little to do with a reading of Marx's philosophical influences and more to do with the dominant tradition of explanation in the social sciences today in the Anglophone world, which is directed towards micro-level understanding at the level of individuals.

Whilst the ontological commitments implicated in Marx's thought have been marginalised, other strands have been pushed into the foreground, in particular treatment of the moral views of Marx, taken as a discrete topic of enquiry. It is commonplace today to distinguish between Marxian writing (the writing of Marx himself) and Marxist writing (which is self avowedly in the Marxist tradition)

² Callinicos, A., (ed.) *Marxist Theory* (Oxford, 1989) p.5.

³ Roemer, J., *A General Theory of Exploitation and Class* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

⁴ Cohen, G. A., *Karl Marx's Theory of History: a Defence* (Oxford, 1978).

⁵ Elster, J., *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, 1985).

⁶ Ware, R., and Neilson, K., (eds.), *Analysing Marxism : New Essays on Analytical Marxism* (Canadian Journal of Philosophy supplementary volume) (Calgary, 1989) p. 5.

and to argue that this distinction remedies the tendencies both to vulgarity in interpretation and to polemicist, instrumentalist readings of Marx⁷. Whilst such a distinction has some merit, it has always been impossible to separate questions of interpretation from the intellectual and political milieu in which they exist. As a result, much recent discussion of Marx, as well as of Marxism, has been conditioned by its aim of disentangling Marx from the actions carried out by movements, parties and states which made claims to act in his name, but which were widely condemned as morally and politically repugnant. Since the collapse of the regimes in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, themselves the self-described concretisation of something called Marxism-Leninism, it has become clear that commentators on Marx in the West have seen the perspective of rescuing the ethically acceptable strands of Marx's writing as increasingly important. There has been a flowering of discussion of Marx's moral views, which has presaged something of a return to Aristotle. On this view Marx is at least still a significant theorist of freedom, autonomy and *eudamonia*, even if at the end of the day, his thought is irremediably utopian. The moral rescue party for Marx is simultaneously propelled by what are widely perceived as the dwindling prospects for Marxism as a 'Grand Narrative'. Conceived in this way Marxism is thought to be reeling from the postmodernist attacks on the notion of ultimate foundations from theory construction.

Conversely, the interpretation outlined here of the Marx/Aristotle relationship aims to key into a reading that roots Marx in ontological reality rather than ethical Utopianism, and thereby takes the post modern critique head on. As Arthur points out in his *Dialectics of Labour*, an ontological rooting of Marx's social view is essential to avoid a situation in which:

critique would be reduced to contesting the validity of the existing order from the standpoint of a historically contingent utopian inspiration. By contrast, Marx's critique acquires a rootedness in material reality whereby it can ground the historical necessity of existing forms, while grasping their limits and the conditions of their supersession.⁸

In the search for this 'rootedness' it is useful to turn attention towards the Marx/Aristotle relationship. Marx was widely influenced by Aristotle: the question is not whether, but how that influence expressed itself. One perspective that this influence is evidenced only, or fundamentally, in a *moral* view, an ethical outlook implicit in Marx which fits with the conception of human

⁷ See, for example Thomas, P., 'Critical Reception: Marx then and now' in T. Carver (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Marx* (Cambridge, 1991).

⁸ Arthur, C., *Dialectics of Labour* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 144-5

flourishing advocated by Aristotle. However this position is continually tempted to collapse into one of two positions out of sympathy to Marx's own commitments. Either this version of ethical Marxism collapses into utopianism because it critiques existing social forms only from the perspective of a utopian future. On the other hand, it may divorce ethical critiques of the effects of existing forms from an understanding of their necessity, and necessary development, eventually softening the critical focus on the structural constraints bourgeois society places on the development of human beings. Down this path lies a retreat from Marx's writing into some version of left-wing liberalism. On the other hand, if Marx drew both an image of how the world *ought* to be, and an explanatory framework of how it *is* and *could* be from Aristotle, then the prospects for integration of the two components are high. That integration suggests that in avoiding utopianism, but sustaining the ancient commitment to a *eudamonic* future, Marx is impelled towards his sceptical attitude to bourgeois social relations.

An integrative project such as this, cannot be realised unless we reject one prevailing intellectual context for Marxist discussion of social ontology. This has often been anti-realist, influenced by Wittgenstein, and aimed at an image of Marxism drawn loosely from radical sociology rather than any work of Marx. A text that is useful for revealing some of the focal points in a Wittgensteinian reading of Marx is Kitching's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Praxis*.⁹ While he says little about Wittgenstein himself, Kitching is admirably explicit about the sort of common assumptions he directs at the nature of Marx's method. His favouring of language use over ontology is particularly clear when he discusses the question of a mode of production:

that a society has such a character, form or stamp is not a characteristic of *it* as it were. It is rather a characterisation of it in thought. And a society is given ... such a character as a mode of production by being compared with societies which have preceded it or followed it.¹⁰

The character of a particular mode of production as capitalist is not an objective feature of the social world, but rather mind dependent and subjective, and is motivated by the observer having epistemological

purposes from which it makes sense to consider material production as more important than anything else in characterising or classifying

⁹ Kitching, G., *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* (London, 1988).

¹⁰ Kitching, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* p. 30.

different societies. But that Marx did so and that Marxists do so, is a characteristic of their activity as Marxists. It is not a characteristic of material production itself. In itself production is neither 'central' nor 'marginal', 'important' nor 'unimportant' in characterising different forms of society.'¹¹

This is an interesting and informative claim though I believe it to be fundamentally wrong. It is motivated by opposition to the idea that a meta-theory could have some overarching and privileged claim to the truth and falsity of certain sorts of social explanation. The reason for regarding the manner of production as primary is transferred from the nature of the social world, or social ontology, to the nature of the inquirer's predispositions, and as such, a feature of epistemology. This, I hold, amounts to a radical misreading of Marx's ontology as I explicate it below, and as Marx himself outlines it more than once, though, it must be conceded, never plainly.

One crucial element in Kitching's argument is to suggest that the claim made both by Marx, and by Marxists, is that it is something inherent in material production itself that makes it primary. It is then a short step to say that one type of material production acts as the classification of the whole society. The first step needs a category of 'brute' material production; production 'in itself' but such a concept would have to be skinned of any attributes whatever, including the attribute of *being-ontologically-basic*. Such a category, such a process, is difficult to imagine, and indeed it is difficult to see what could be true about an 'activity-in-itself' that could make it explanatorily primary. Since material production is not an object, but an activity or a process, we cannot conceive of a possible universe in which there is just material production and nothing else; it is ontologically parasitic on an agent who materially produces, and some sort of environment which furnishes the agent with the materials from which to produce. But whilst any element in this ontologically basic triple is parasitic on the existence of the other elements, so any social form at all is ontologically parasitic on this triple: productive activity mediating between the human species and nature. The method adopted in this thesis is to view social processes as inextricably tied to the conception of the furniture of the world, and therefore to be seen as expressive of social ontology. The key elements of that social ontology are the human species productively relating to, transforming and manufacturing the conditions of existence. This is why, when Marx regards the foundational nature of productive activity as basic, he is making a claim which he regards as obvious about the way the world is, and must be:

¹¹ Kitching, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* p. 30.

Every child knows that a nation which ceased to work... even for a few weeks would perish. Every child knows too that the volume of products corresponding to the different needs require different and quantitatively determined amounts of the total labour of society.¹²

It is true that Marx shies away from constant reiteration of what he regards as obvious; the biological necessity of production in order to satisfy human needs. This is partially because of his Aristotelian opposition to Platonic universals, examined below. However, it is profoundly unsympathetic to the thrust of his argument to suggest that this productivism is simply a mental predisposition to foreground a certain feature of a society, no more or less intrinsically important than any other feature. Kitching appears to look through the wrong end of the telescope in that he fails to relate material production to the needs of man, instead considering it epistemologically, as a category of thought. It reflects an antipathy towards Marx's philosophical position which is again manifested in Kitching's account of the vexed, and *Short Course*¹³ inspired, question of the correspondencies between base and superstructure. In the course of this discussion, Kitching reconstructs an image of society as a pyramid and parallels it to the human body, and argues that the grip of Marx's ontology is explicable by linguistic considerations. Through this, he deprecates the classical Marxist political project, insofar as it involves the central agency of the working class, or in other words, as Marx understood it.

The last area in which Kitching's philosophical failings reflect upon his understanding of Marx to the detriment of the latter is in the account he gives of the labour theory of value, and in particular of the crucial, for Marx and Engels, distinction between labour and labour power. Kitching wants to shift the terrain of this distinction from economics to philosophy:

if 'labour power' is a philosophical rather than a strictly economic concept, then the whole issue is recast. Since for Marx the essence of human beings (their 'species being') is their capacity for creative activity, then in selling this, in reducing this to a commodity they quite literally 'sell their soul'. A positively Faustian bargain is struck between the capitalist and the worker. The full force of Marx's philosophical objection to capitalism

¹² Marx to Dr Kugelmann, 11 July 1868 in *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1955) p. 196.

¹³ *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Short Course)*, edited by a Commission of the C.C. of the C.P.S.U, (B.) (London, 1938).

becomes clear'¹⁴

But for Marx part of the importance of the distinction between labour and labour power is precisely that human beings do *not* sell their soul, either literally or metaphorically, that this is a crucial, defining distinction between the form of surplus extraction of feudalism and the form of surplus extraction under capitalism, and that the real freedom (though greatly limited, and fluctuating in extent) of workers that this entails has enormous philosophical, political and cultural implications. Marx's philosophical objection to capitalism is not that it is a sort of totalistic hell in which the workers are utterly subordinate to the capitalists, but that it is a society in which human potential is thwarted by the social relations of production. Those relations are themselves the site of a struggle over the labour process itself, a struggle inconceivable if the capitalists had purchased the worker's labour as well as his labour power. The elision of labour and labour power, one of the banes of Marx's life, only makes sense on the basis of the erosion of his entire theory of value. Presumably for Kitching though, the labour theory is just one way among many of looking at things, and thus has no exclusive correspondence to what goes on in the labour market. On his reading the politics that Marx could articulate would be very different: if workers did somehow sell their souls then capitalism would be utterly condemned by Marx. The oft noted paradox in his approval of the political freedom available under capitalism and his commendation of its partially progressive nature would disappear. Equally there could be no recognition of the class struggle over the level of expropriation of surplus value; over the length of the working day, for example.

In this and similar ways, questions that begin as concerned with ontology soon grow over into questions with political consequences. Analytical Marxism has arisen as a consequence of the inroads made by individualist methodologies and atomist ontologies into social theory. It should therefore come as little surprise that many of its adherents now largely disclaim any substantial doctrine to be found in Marx's work. Wittgensteinian interpretations of Marx, with ironically the same substantive political consequences, shows the influence of anti-foundationalism and relativist replacements for ontology. A redrawing of Marx's claims, with reference to their Aristotelian antecedents, will assist in the task of reformulating Marxist conceptions of both ontology and method in opposition to both anti-foundationalism and relativism.

What is more, the key themes of social theory; the possibility of reduction, what

¹⁴ Kitching, *Karl Marx and the Philosophy of Praxis* p. 111.

it is to offer an explanation of a phenomenon, the nature of change and the role of functional and organic explanation are not only ontological, but are all widely discussed by Aristotle. By re-engaging with the Aristotelian tradition it becomes possible to refill the core of Marx's argument with its explanatory force.

In addition, the commitments of Marx need to be examined again in the light of fresh philosophical developments which have made his realist ambitions easier to stomach. The realist idea: that real structures that are hidden from view give rise to empirically observable phenomena, has received relatively recent support. Since Kripke, Wiggins and others reinvigorated the Aristotelian tradition from the late sixties onwards, there has been less shame attached to the claims of both realism and the related doctrine of essentialism in the philosophical world, but this has yet to penetrate very far into the arena of social theory. More generally there has been made possible a refocussing on *systematic* conceptions of the world generated by an (muted) quasi-Aristotelian rejection of relativism where it tends to permeate into analytical philosophy. Nonetheless, whatever the state of play of analytical philosophy, if there were no sign of an influence of Aristotelianism in Marx, there would be little point in asserting themes drawn from Aristotle in a reconstruction of his work. Rather, the absence of such a strand would militate against such a reconstruction.

In order to justify claims for the existence of such a strand of thought then, I shall initially take two intellectual perspectives. The first is to examine the context of Marx's early work at the University of Bonn and then at Berlin and the particular reading and study this led him to undertake. The second is to look at the interpretative possibilities opened up by consideration of Aristotelianism as a major theme in Marx's own writing. Despite the pressing evidence from Marx's reading in the early 1840's, and his avowed appreciation of Aristotle as 'the great scientist'¹⁵ later in his life, it is the latter aspect, the substantive questions which are central to this enquiry. It is my assessment that, regardless of considerations drawn below from Marx's intellectual history, the Aristotelian accent of his ontology is sustainable. If this is the case, then a consideration of these themes in the light of recent developments in analytical philosophy is likely to be constructive.

Marx and Aristotle: the relationship and the commentators.

It is perhaps becoming more common to point to the influence of Greek antiquity in general, and Aristotle in particular, on the work of Marx. He did it himself, citing Aristotle throughout his work, and more recent Marxists, notably of a

¹⁵ Marx, K., *Capital 1*, (Harmondsworth, 1976) p. 151.

'humanist' bent, such as Ernst Bloch¹⁶, Cornelius Castoriadis¹⁷ and Georg Lukács¹⁸ have all made something of the Greek accent in Marx's work. However it has not been the subject of sustained academic scrutiny until very recently. Allen Wood set the tone for the recent surge in studies of this relationship with his broadly Aristotelian account of Marx¹⁹ and George McCarthy has contributed both *Marx and the Ancients*²⁰ and a recent symposium *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity*²¹ which highlights a number of themes from Aristotle which are drawn into Marx's writing. To the extent that any collection can have one, the focus of these articles is on Marx's philosophical anthropology and in particular the nature and status of his moral critique of capitalism. Much is made, convincingly, of the fit between the emancipatory vision of Marx and the account offered by Aristotle of what constitutes the good life. The bulk of the commentators work on the basis of a common 'transcendental understanding of the relation between human nature and political economy: economics as the subordinate foundation for the primary goals of human achievement in the community.'²² However, political economy, rather than economics was Marx's preferred term for his main subject of study, and crucial to the distinction is the idea of the irreducibly political nature of economic thought, and the irreducibly social nature of its meaning and function. Such irreducibility implicitly outlaws transcendence of 'economics' by a normative view: rather it demands the incorporation of the potentials of social being into the dynamics of social forms and so the incorporation of philosophical anthropology into the ontology of political economy.

¹⁶ Bloch, E., *Avicenna und die Aristotlische Linke*, (Leipzig, 1952): reprinted in Bloch *Das Materialismus Problem* (Frankfurt, 1970, and for the application of Aristotle to Marx, Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (Frankfurt, 1970), Vol. II pp. 237 ff.

¹⁷ Castoriadis, C., *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (Massachusetts, 1984) pp. 260-339

¹⁸ For Lukács, not only is the 'humanist struggle against the degradation of man by the capitalist division of labour' inspired by the imitation of Greek literature and art (*Goethe and his Age* (London, 1968) p. 12. Also in his last major work, the *Ontology of Social Being*, (London, 1978) he refers to the need to re-articulate the ancient theory of essence, by restoring its dynamism. He acknowledges Aristotle's attempt to 'experiment' in the direction of the development of a social ontology, involving 'a conscious recognition of the primary existence of major complexes of being ... in connection with the criticism of idealist systematic thought.' The target is Plato, and the evidence Lukács employs is drawn from the *Nicomachean Ethics*. (*Ontology of Social Being* Volume Two: Marx p. 20)

¹⁹ Wood, A., *Karl Marx* (London, 1981).

²⁰ McCarthy, G. E., *Marx and the Ancients; Classical Ethics, Social Justice and Nineteenth Century Political Economy* (Maryland, 1990).

²¹ McCarthy, G. E., (ed.), *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity* (Maryland, 1992).

²² McCarthy, *Marx and Aristotle* p. 7.

This thesis then argues that such discussion is like Hamlet without the Prince. For what is missing is an acknowledgement of the debt Marx owes to Aristotle's metaphysics and the role of that set of ideas in fleshing out Marx's social ontology. Whilst there is a clear Aristotelian resonance in Marx's moral view, it is one of the *lacunae* of considerations of Marx that it is possible to give an account of Marx's normative views, such as they are, in relative isolation from his account of the development of capitalism.²³ Marx rejects the is/ought bifurcation which, emphasised by the Enlightenment, characterises the morality of modernity. Instead, his view is that societies, and *a fortiori* capitalism developed in certain ways, at least in part because they contained certain sorts of things, and that this development had prescriptive implications for the goal of human freedom. Just like any other social theorist, Marx had a view of what sorts of things exist, and how they behave, though neither for Marx, nor for most social theorists, is this clearly spelt out. In his case, the implicit view is fairly systematic. In spite of this, perhaps the most elemental and elementary quarrels between those who see themselves as Marxists and their critics are over the very existence of classes, or value, or the state, and hence a question of competing ontologies. The father of all such discussion is Aristotle and many of the grand themes of social theory such as the nature of explanation and the possibility of reduction are rehearsed in his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*. Yet of all Aristotle's major works, these are the ones that receive least attention from those commentators that draw an antique provenance for Marx. In their place, the focus is almost entirely on the *Politics* and the *Nicomachean Ethics*, to the exclusion of the metaphysical works

To argue for a return to ontological discussion of Marx, as I have done, is simultaneously to point to the area in which the influence of Aristotle is at its most keen. Just as Marx turned his back on the is/ought of bourgeois thought, Aristotle would have been somewhat perplexed by the separation of a moral theory from consideration of the nature of human social existence, or social ontology. And social ontology is no different in terms of its demands for coherence and explanatory plausibility from ontology *tout court*. Despite the dangers of embarking on another quest to show what Marx really meant, it is essential to redraw Marx's ontological positions in order to make complete sense of consequent moral claims. The real basics, for Marx, are the basics of what

²³ This is a product of the division of labour in the academic world between moral philosophers and those who might be called 'social theorists', though even this description is usually divided up in a modern university. Such division of academic labour, it should be said, is clearly counter to the spirit of Marx's own extensive theorising.

exists.

Another reason for aiming to reconstruct Marx's most general theoretical foundations is the nagging feeling that a highly theorised and undoubtedly contested moral theory is, in the end, just unnecessary as a grounding of Marxist normative political positions. This is the line argued, in a self consciously iconoclastic way, by Kai Nielsen in an article in *Radical Philosophy*: 'Does Marxian Critical Theory of Society need a Moral Theory?'²⁴ and if the argument is taken seriously then the focus on ethical concerns emerges as a little paradoxical. It seems as if commentators have virtually given up on Marx's claims to have developed a theory of the way a particular society; capitalism, emerges and matures. Instead they have turned to moral theories of the potential fulfilling type, when such theories are largely redundant in the presence of the former theory, and just empty words in its absence. Instead a broad series of moral platitudes or truisms can be adequate since the main work is done by an empirically informed critical theory. Such moral truisms include saying that 'freedom is a good thing, that more equal freedom is a good thing, and that democracy is a good thing' If these are accepted, then the questions faced in justifying Marxist political positions are a matter of empirical enquiry, such as the claim that 'a democratic, self managing socialist society is a real historical possibility. Socialists believe that it is. But it is an empirical claim and it may indeed be false.'²⁵ This seems to me to be quite well founded, though Nielsen himself is very cautious in putting his new position, particularly since it appears to contradict the argument contained in *Marxism and the Moral point of view*. But the empirical theses that Nielsen outlines are generated by Marx from a series of ontological points of view, which themselves need to be understood before it is possible to embark on their empirical testing in the external world.

Such a project; the integration of Marx's social ontology with its Aristotelian assumptions, involves more than a situating of Marx as a 'revolutionary traditionalist,'²⁶ straddling modernity and antiquity, contrasting the harmonious vision of the *polis* to the inadequacies and degeneracies of bourgeois society. It also demands a consideration of the development of contemporary Aristotelianism and its impact on the interpretation of Marx. Such a course can alter the judgement of some of Marx's pivotal positions, validating his presuppositions and method, particularly against the influential critique offered

²⁴ Nielsen, K., 'Does Marxian Critical Theory of Society need a Moral Theory?' *Radical Philosophy* 59, (1991).

²⁵ Nielsen, K., 'Does Marxian Critical Theory of Society need a Moral Theory?' p. 24.

²⁶ McCarthy (ed.) *Marx and Aristotle* p. 20.

by Jon Elster.²⁷ Bringing in an Aristotelian dimension to Marx's thought raises new questions; sometimes more than it answers though this in itself may be an advance, and points to some new perspectives on some of the hoary old debates in Marx studies. Some of these are the ontological roots of the parallelism between Marx and Aristotle as ethical thinkers, the prospects opened up by a consideration of Marx as an Aristotelian in his account of the special laws of capitalism, and the consequences of contemporary essentialism, especially a theory of individuation, for teasing out Marx's social ontology. In the course of this thesis I hope to suggest some views on the questions of whether Marx is a theorist first and foremost of bourgeois society or of society as such, and whether he conceives of bourgeois society as natural or as an artificial construct, a question with implications for the view one takes on the Wood/Husami debate.²⁸

Some commentators, such as Cohen have drawn up an overarching theory of history which they aim to derive from Marx, while others, such as Meikle, have condemned accounts based on overarching laws: 'Marx's laws are not universal conditional statements but, as Marx says, are specific to a given social organism.'²⁹ While it is worth insisting on the perspective of special laws of specific social organisms that Marx accepts (rather than states) in the afterword to the second German edition of *Capital*, it is still true that the specification of an overall ontological framework in Marx is a specification of how he thinks and analyses the nature of all societies, not just capitalism and therefore has more of the status of an overarching theory. The notion of special laws demands the identification of discrete social organisms that those laws apply to. It therefore demands a theory of the nature of social organisms and an account of the *differentia specifica* which make organisms of a certain sort, that particular sort of organism in the first place. Marx wields a certain series of ontological categories that allow him to make that sort of judgement, derived from the ancients. Hence Cohen's generalised account of the form/matter distinction and its universal applicability is justified; he says for example: 'The relation between form and matter may not be the same in pre-capitalist production but the distinction must apply to it and it does.'³⁰

²⁷ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*.

²⁸ See Wood *Karl Marx* pp. 130-140 for his view that capitalism exploits justly and the comment by Z. Husami 'Marx on Distributive Justice'. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 8 (1978) On the argument developed here it becomes possible to argue that capitalism is just *vis a vis* its form and unjust *vis a vis* its matter.

²⁹ Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* p.11 footnote 14

³⁰ Cohen, G. A., *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, (Oxford 1978) p.102.

CHAPTER TWO
SNAPPING THE BONDS; MARX AND ANTIQUITY IN THE EARLY
WRITINGS

The Aristotelian context of Marx's early studies

Marx transferred his work to Berlin University in 1837, at a time when political science and sociology had not yet come into existence as independent disciplines. Consequently their putative practitioners had yet to begin their gropings towards a 'scientific' methodology, and, partly as a result, Berlin was an academy whose 'character was determined above all by the cultivation of classical studies and of speculative philosophy'¹ according to Paulsen. These were pre-positivist days, where the standardised debates about social theory of the twentieth century were only very indirectly prefigured. Consideration of the Hellenic world was still dominant, though contending in philosophical circles with discussion of Kant and Hegel. In the view of Heinz Lubasz, one of the first commentators to point to the Marx/Aristotle inheritance, the intellectual backdrop to Marx's work on his doctoral dissertation was a:

remarkable revival of Aristotle in the 1830's when the first modern scholarly edition of his work began to be published, first in Germany and then in England.²

The publication of the great modern edition of Aristotle's works was begun by Immanuel Bekker at the Berlin Academy in 1831, five years before Marx's arrival and was continued up to 1870, making it much easier for scholars to determine and to clarify Aristotle's texts. Marx, writing in an intellectual context, even ferment, of Aristotelianism, could hardly fail to become well acquainted with the canonical works of the corpus. And he did not fail.

At Berlin Marx worked on his doctoral dissertation *Difference between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*.³ As preparation for this enterprise and in this milieu, he studied classical Greek philosophy in general and Epicurean philosophy in particular, completing seven notebooks in 1839.⁴ These reveal that Marx became acquainted with key Aristotelian texts in this period, most notably the *Metaphysics*, *Physics*, *Generation of Animals*, *On Generation and*

¹ Paulsen, G., *German Education: Past and Present* (place, 1912) pp. 184 ff..

² Lubasz, H., 'The Aristotelian Dimension in Marx', *THES* (1 April 1977) p. 17.

³ Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation CW* Vol. 1 pp. 25-105.

⁴ The first four and seventh notebooks are headed 'Epicurean Philosophy' and the covers of notebooks 2-4 are dated Winter Term 1839. These are collected in Marx, *CW* 1, pp. 403-515.

Corruption, On the Heavens, and Rhetoric, since the first four are cited in the notebooks and all are cited in the doctoral dissertation. It is not therefore at all surprising that the explanatory categories of the Dissertation, such as essence and existence, are drawn from the Scholastic tradition. It should be noted however, that the primary focus of the dissertation is not on Aristotle but on the dispute between the two Greek atomists, Democritus and Epicurus, one the materialist predecessor of Aristotle and the other, his radical and subjectivist successor.

Marx's Doctoral Dissertation

Marx first distinguishes the thought of Epicurus from that of Democritus, against the interpretation of Plutarch and Cicero which tended to conflate them,⁵ and then commends Epicurus's thought over that of the earlier atomist. Overlaying this story however, are other themes; of the debates over conceptions of science and nature, of the relation between social development and philosophical consciousness of it, and, unsurprisingly given Marx's immersion in the philosophical disputes of his time, of the disputes within German idealism between Kant and Hegel. This complexity of theme means that Marx's dissertation is a difficult work to read and interpret since the concepts invoked are often opaque, and the limits between differing perspectives and objects of discussion are confused. It is, however, possible to draw out some key components of Marx's system which are rooted in the Dissertation: centrally that he is above all a theorist of freedom and regards this, both ethically and metaphysically as a matter of reconciling essence to existence, and form to content. Although McCarthy wrongly claims that 'Marx saw in Epicurus the first philosopher to incorporate the notion of the contradiction between essence and reality into his thought'⁶ the fact that Marx recognised the same contradiction in Aristotle's thought as well, only helps to reinforce the centrality of it in his own thinking.

Marx's early concern with the question of how it is possible for humans to be free, as well as his grappling with the categories of essence, being or existence, and appearance are all expounded in the doctoral dissertation which takes place against a back drop of the controversies in German idealism. For Fenes,

the battle lines are drawn between Hegel's science of logic which executes dialectical contradiction and Kant's notion of natural science grounded in a

⁵ Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation* CW 1 p. 38.

⁶ McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients* p. 31.

transcendental philosophy which avoids all contradictory moments.⁷

In Marx's view, Epicurus has the better scientific credentials, welcoming as he does Epicurus' refusal to accept the law of non-contradiction. He objectifies the contradiction between essence and existence and thus, according to Marx, gives us the science of atomism. On Marx's reading, Democritus is Kantian whereas Epicurus prefigures the Hegelian conception of science. By demonstrating the contradictory nature of matter, Epicurus lays the basis for conceiving of science as a form of idealism and avoids the Kantian project of science as endless empirical research. Marx is also attracted to the ethical position of Epicurus, largely because of its iconoclasm and herein lies a critical division between the two atomists. The young, radical, Marx already cites Prometheus' battle cry 'I hate the pack of Gods' in his preface, and his own fire, allied with that of Epicurus, is directed not only at alienating theologies but also at the delimiting of human autonomy by the deterministic laws of nature that feature in Democritus' atomistic mechanism. In contrast, Epicurus is commended since he:

has nothing but contempt for the positive sciences, since in his opinion they contribute nothing to true perfection.⁸

In validating his perspective, though not his entire system, Marx follows Epicurus in championing the possibility of a thorough going epistemology, against Kant, through the agency of a knowing self conscious subject and set against the demands of external objectivity. Such a possibility is in stark contrast to Marx's indictment of the pessimism over epistemology with which Democritus concludes. For him, the reality of the atom is only perceived through reason while the information gathered from the senses is only of 'subjective semblances'. This Chinese wall between the unknowable essential nature of the atom and the sensuous world prefigures Kant and is condemned by Marx using Hegel's critique of Kant's categorical imperative. For Hegel, Kant was guilty of empty formalism in the formulation of the categorical imperative, illicitly importing hidden empirical information to do the work in generating moral precepts. Marx inveighs against Democritus in a similar manner, condemning his downgrading of empirical information to merely subjective semblances (*schein*):

while Democritus turns the sensuous world into subjective semblance, Epicurus turns it into objective appearance. And here he differs quite

⁷Fenves, P., 'Marx's Doctoral Thesis on Two Greek Atomists and the Post-Kantian Interpretations', *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1986), p.433.

⁸Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation* CW 1, p. 41.

consciously, since he claims that he shares the same principles but that he does not reduce the sensuous qualities to things of mere appearance.⁹

But for Democritus' programme, the resulting knowledge of semblances is vacuous since it is not knowledge of the principles (of the atoms) which are unrelated to sensual semblance:

The knowledge which he considers true is without content and the knowledge that gives him a content is without truth.¹⁰

Marx articulates a knowing self conscious subject, far removed from the Cartesian self, and grounded in the somewhat bizarre Epicurean theory of the swerve or declination (*parenklisis*) of atoms. Epicurus had argued, to widespread mockery, that a slight swerve of the atoms left open a space in Democritus' determinism and thus made human autonomy possible. It is the nature of the atom itself which causes such declination and thus enables men to attain ataraxy or happiness. Just such a state represents, for Marx, the first form of self consciousness. It derives from the idea of the atom as abstract individuality:

What is the source of that will power snatched from the fates whereby we follow the path along which we are severally led by pleasure But the fact that the mind itself has no internal necessity to determine its every act and compel it to suffer in helpless passivity, this is due to the slight swerve of the atoms, not determined by place or time.¹¹

Commenting on these passages from the poetic philosopher Lucretius, Marx writes that 'This potestas, this declinare is the defiance, the headstrongness of the atom, the *quiddam in pectore* of the atom.'¹²

He clearly approves of this wilful subjectivity. Commentators such as Fennes and McCarthy plausibly detect signs of Marx's critique of positivist science in his preference for Epicurus in this text. It is indeed notable that Marx favours even a grossly implausible explanation that incorporates a teleology of the atoms, to one that remains at the level of efficient causation, deadening, as it does, the possibility of human intentionality. Despite this, the philosophical shortcomings of Epicurus's position are quite well known. Human free will and autonomy are

⁹ Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation* CW 1, p. 40.

¹⁰ Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation* CW 1, p. 41.

¹¹ Marx, *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* CW 1, p. 475.

¹² Marx, *Notebooks on Epicurean Philosophy* CW 1, p.475.

not the same as indeterminacy or brute randomness, which both still leave the subjective content of human action waiting outside the act, yet to enter into its explanation. Nevertheless, Marx's interest is more finely honed to the *status* of such autonomy. Self consciousness in its first form allows a transcendence of the contradiction between the abstract atom and its existence in a sensuous world. Such self consciousness is the way in which essence and existence can be reconciled, and Marx validates Epicurus on precisely this point:

The following consequences can be drawn from these observations. first, Epicurus makes the contradiction between matter and form the characteristic of the nature of appearance, which thus becomes the counter image of the nature of essence, the atom.¹³

The method of investigation of the sensuous world is thus a matter of honing and tracing the development of self consciousness as it overcomes the limits of an external world, and in this Marx is at one with Epicurus, in his avowal of the primacy of self consciousness, and the ethical foundations of all science.

The extreme iconoclasm of this position is remarkable. Democritus, and Aristotle, are condemned as idolatrous, since they hold physics to be distinct from ethics and not subordinate to it. If the natural world conflicts with the demands of self consciousness, construed as ataraxy, then so much the worse for the natural world: its supposed laws are myths for the restriction of human happiness or ataraxy:

It is an absolute law that nothing that can disturb ataraxy, that can cause danger, can belong to an indestructible and eternal nature. Consciousness must understand that this is an absolute law. Hence Epicurus concludes: *Since eternity of the heavenly bodies would disturb the ataraxy of self consciousness, it is necessary, a stringent consequence that they are not eternal.*¹⁴

This privileging of the self conscious ethical subject over the constraints of the external world is the most remarkable feature of Epicurus' philosophy. It allows Marx to transcend the empty formalism of the essence/existence contradiction which he detects in both Democritus and Kant. He expresses his affinity towards Epicurus' radical subjectivism by reference to the intellectual context of the end of a great philosophical system. Both in subtending the early emergence of his

¹³ Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation* CW 1, p. 64.

¹⁴ Marx, *Doctoral Dissertation* CW 1, p. 70.

lifelong concern with the question of how it is that we can be free, and in his coming to terms with Hegel, Marx's attitude to Epicurus is instructive. The first chapter of his thesis shows the parallel he draws between his own time, five years after the death of Hegel, and the period of Epicurean philosophy built on the collapse of the Aristotelian system:

...It is a commonplace that birth, flowering and decline constitute the iron circle in which everything human is enclosed, through which it must pass. Thus it would not have been surprising if Greek Philosophy, after having reached its zenith in Aristotle, should then have withered. But the death of the hero resembles the setting of the sun, not the bursting of an inflated frog. And then: birth, flowering, and decline are very general, very vague notions under which to be sure, everything can be arranged, but through which nothing can be understood. Decay itself is prefigured in the living: its shape should therefore be just as much grasped in its specific characteristic as the shape of life.¹⁵

Not only does Marx expound here an Aristotelian stress on change but he uses it to underpin an account of the intellectual history of ancient Greece. He wants to account for the particular nature of post-Aristotelian philosophy and, most importantly, for its subjectivism and elevation of self consciousness. He articulates this by asking rhetorically:

is it an accident that with the Epicureans, Stoics, and Sceptics, all moments of self consciousness are represented completely...?¹⁶

The growing importance of self consciousness in the post Aristotelian philosophers also implicates them in a radical break with Aristotle. Hillman¹⁷ suggests that in this very break with Aristotle and the development of an alternative understanding of subjectivity, Marx sharpens his own critique and break with Hegel, and that the example of Epicurus give Marx the strength to do this. As such, the philosophical moment of subjectivism becomes possible.

The strongest theme therefore in Marx's doctoral dissertation is the transcendence of the contradiction between essence and existence through the agency of a radical subjectivity. While he is not well disposed to Aristotle's system

¹⁵ *CW*, 1, p. 35.

¹⁶ *CW*, 1, p. 35.

¹⁷ Hillman, G., *Marx und Hegel: Von der Spekulation zur Dialektik* (Frankfurt/Main, 1966) cited in McCarthy, *Marx and Aristotle*, p. 299.

at this point, it is nevertheless clear that this theme repeats itself in Marx's later work. The Greek ideal of squaring essences with their worldly incarnations is broached and Marx makes some preliminary gestures towards its resolution.

Many caveats must remain however. Marx is not at this point a developed social philosopher and, much more, he lacks a developed ontology. Nonetheless, some of the outlines can be seen. Inspired by Hellenic ideals, and working with categories drawn from the traditions of Greek Philosophy, Marx already has a critical stance towards the emerging positivism and an inextinguishable faith in the potency of self consciousness to overcome the contradictory relations between the sensuous world and its essences. In working this up, he refills the notions of essence and existence, as well as the related concepts, towards which he moves, of form and matter, with specific meaning drawn from his social ontology. The images of his later work are faintly present in the Dissertation which still serves to lay down a plank in the argument that critiques conceptions of Marx as a thinker of the Enlightenment.

The contradictions between essence and existence, and form and matter, which dominate Marx's doctoral dissertation are carried over into the political works of the next three years albeit with different impulsions. The *Articles on the Free Press*¹⁸ conceive of the state as the realisation of Reason. But increasingly Marx is unhappy with the Hegelian identification of the essence of freedom with the existing objective world and particularly the class of bureaucrats that controls it through the State. For him, this arises through Hegel's failure to reconcile universality and particularity in the *Philosophy of Right*. In the course of his *Critique*, Marx develops his own thinking on the way in which such a reconciliation can be attempted, involving a development on the explication of Epicureanism in the *Doctoral Dissertation*.

Whilst for Hegel the state acts as a terminus for the human struggle to be free, for Marx, the contradiction between essence and existence requires a different model of freedom, in which it is conceived of as the realisation of the human essence through the transformation of the limiting conditions imposed by the external world. In these writings, morality for Marx is based on the autonomy of the human mind and freedom is the generic essence of all spiritual existence. In this framework the is/ought distinction is overcome by, first, the investigation of and then, the realisation of the human essence: 'only that which is a realisation of freedom can be called humanly good.'¹⁹ Morality here is then intertwined with the

¹⁸ Marx, *CW 1*, p. 162.

¹⁹ Marx, *CW 1*, p. 159.

idea of what a thing is, and 'good' is interpreted in a way very close to Aristotle's account on which the good man is the one who best fulfils the essence of man.²⁰

Kain says that for both Marx and Hegel:

freedom is only realised when the objective external world and our feelings fit, agree with and support the subjective rational freedom of the individual. Laws and institutions feelings and customs as well as the rationality of the individual must form a single organic spiritual unity.²¹

But, against Hegel, in the *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*, Marx is at pains to recast the essence/existence contradiction into one which necessitates the overthrow of the conditions which bring it in to play. This reveals the nature of Hegel's conservatism in that he rejects the 'ought' as unrealised for the 'is' of the Prussian state; conceived of as the realisation of reason, with the cry that 'what is real is rational'. As the terrain of the contradiction changes, Marx's programme for its resolution changes too. The common element tying the explanatory categories of the dissertation to the *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State*, is his focus on self consciousness. Insofar as this is the case, he is Hegelian, but increasingly the self consciousness is entwined with the sort of practical knowledge of the world that is acquired by interacting with it, thereby beginning to realise the human essence. Fenves comments:

one can be quite exact in determining Marx's transition from the philosophy of nature to the philosophy of politics: the resolution of the contradiction of atomism demands the speculative *aufhebung* of matter and hence the dismissal of any science which attempts to investigate its general laws, whereas the resolution of the contradiction between civil society and the political state requires the determination of its historical condition and the active participation in the cancellation of those conditions.²²

This active participation occurs through the agency of labour which comes into

²⁰ G. Cohen has argued, informally, that the attitude of Marx to capitalism is like the attitude of a doctor to a debilitating growth in a human being. The doctor is in some sense opposed to the growth, and works to remove it, but he is not 'morally' opposed to it. Further more, the reasons for curing someone of a debilitating growth ought not to be related any particular purpose that the patient has, but just so they are able to fulfil whatever potential they might have. The Aristotelian basis of the 'potential fulfilling' ethic is clear, even if the analogy, like every analogy, is incomplete.

²¹ Kain, *Marx and Ethics* p. 19.

²² Fenves, 'Marx's Doctoral Dissertation', pp. 450-1.

the foreground in Marx's work and reaches its apex in the Paris Manuscripts; Kain comments:

for the young Marx the human species through its labour constitutes, moulds and purposively controls the objective social and natural realm... the subject constitutes the object, objectifies itself in it, finds itself at home with it and thus is free.²³

But even by the time of the *Critique*, Marx has moved beyond his point of view in the doctoral dissertation, and never again is he willing to rest contented with the idea that the contradiction between matter and form can be overcome by thought alone. This is the mark of his decisive theoretical break with Hegel. In the *Doctoral Dissertation*, Marx begins to worry away at the problem of his life: the question of how it is possible to free ourselves through the reconciliation of essence to existence, and as early as the writing of the *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* he has rejected the idea that the synthesis is to be achieved through the agency of thought. This assessment of the philosophical problem at the centre of human existence and the analyses involved in resolving it, are to develop enormously throughout Marx's life. Nonetheless, both the way of posing the question, characterised by its Scholastic mode of expression, in terms of the reconciliation of matter and form and the terrain on which it is first posed: presupposing and exhibiting a deep familiarity with the philosophical texts of Ancient Greece, mark out a thread that runs through those later analyses.

Marx, Aristotle and Ontology

Marx's very early reading of the Ancients and Aristotle in particular gives a key to unlock some of the hidden structures of his thought. There is embedded in Marx a motivation to uncover the constant tension between the form and matter of bourgeois society, and to identify social categories by reaching behind the characteristic behaviour exhibited by certain sorts of things to achieve the cognitive capture of their *telos*. What Marx takes from Aristotle is not reducible to the *Graecomania* of the eighteenth century German Humanists, or a consequentialist moral theory whose end is human flourishing. It goes deeper than that. Marx's whole *Weltanschauung* is suffused with Aristotelian ways of thinking. What is more, such ways of thinking not only worked for Marx, but gather increasing support from developments in analytical philosophy in the Aristotelian mode, which have occurred in recent years.

Marx is not simply an Aristotelian social theorist, for his account of historical

²³ Kain, *Marx and Ethics* p. 20.

change is concrete and is drawn from a reading of classical political economy as well as from the historical writers of the Scottish Enlightenment. Rather, he has an understanding of existing social forms that is only explicable in terms of his early reading. His practical and theoretical efforts to reconcile the form and matter of specifically bourgeois society, only make sense on the basis of his very early attempts to theorise that relation through the prism of Hellenistic philosophy. The theoretical structure of Marx's later corpus resides in a metaphysics drawn from the Aristotelian tradition.

CHAPTER THREE
THE ARISTOTELIAN TRADITION IN ONTOLOGY

Substance and Matter in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*

One central aspect of Aristotle's world view that has social theoretic implications is his theory of substance and composites. It stems from two sources; in the *Metaphysics* it is derived largely from the logic of linguistic usage whereas in the *Physics* it arises out of the analysis of change. There are further important distinctions in the two accounts of substance; the *Physics* emphasises the plurality of form and matter while the *Metaphysics* emphasises their unity; a tension that has implications for Marx's use of the distinction. Despite these differences the account can be reconstructed broadly enough for the present purpose without diverting into detailed exegesis.

Aristotle outlines his project in the *Metaphysics* as the investigation of the knowledge of existence, in a section that sets down the limits of metaphysics and can also be taken as definitive of ontology:

There is a branch of knowledge that studies being *qua* being, and the attributes that belong to it in virtue of its own nature. Now this is not the same as any of the special sciences, since none of these enquires about being *qua* being. They cut off some part of it and study the attributes of this part. That is what the mathematical sciences do, for instance. But since we are seeking the first principles, the highest causes, it is of being *qua* being that we must grasp the first causes.¹

Aristotle faced two constraints in the investigation of being *qua* being: that his exposition was categorially adequate to cover the range of sublunary entities, and at the same time, that the categories he employed provide an adequate refutation of the monist claim of Parmenides and the Eleatics, that 'What is, is one and unchangeable'. It is worth noting this purpose for the account of substance: providing a reply to Parmenides suggests that, from the first, the conception of substance was tied up with the question of change and also with telling the *history* of change. Aristotle observes that things are said to be in many different ways, but that there is a special class of terms which answer the question 'what is X?' These terms capture what falls into the primary category of being; substance (*ousiai*) and so the question; 'what being is, is the same question what substance is.'² What, precisely, substance is, is laid out in *Metaphysics* V.7 where Aristotle

¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1003a 21.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1028a 10.

outlines two key criteria:

Things are called substances in two ways, whatever is the ultimate subject which is no longer said of anything else; and whatever, being this so and so is also separable.³

The two criteria here are clear enough; they concern *individuation*: to qualify as a substance an entity has to possess 'thisness', and *non-parasitism*: a substance is an entity that has an independent existence. So substances are ontologically basic; the basic forms of being; in the sense first that they are existents, and second that they are the existents that all else is dependent on, but are themselves dependent on no other thing. For Aristotle, the sorts of things that are substances are neither the subsensible particles of the atomists nor the forms of Plato. Instead, he develops his notion of substance by a process of elimination of various candidates; stuffs or materials, dependent objects, powers, and dispensable terms, and generalises his account to include living things of all species. He sometimes seems to include a criterion of generation and repeatedly remarks that man begets man. In this manner he focuses on his typical substance - the individual member of a genus.

Empiricist critics have attacked the doctrine of substance for its alleged idealism.⁴ Berkeley sets the pace here, jeering at Locke's account of substance as an 'unknowable substrate'. For Berkeley the notion of material substance contains a contradiction, since it involves acceptance of the claim that an idea may exist in an unperceiving thing, violating the 'obvious tho' amazing principle that, for sensible things, their 'esse is percipi'; to be is to be perceived. This represents the most radical reduction of ontology to perception.⁵

But, regardless of the effectiveness of this point that Berkeley makes against Locke, Aristotle is putting forward a substantially different position, which is

³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1017b 23-26.

⁴ This is ironic in view of, on the one hand, the importance Marx places on the notion in his theory of value, and the widespread understanding of Marx as the philosophical materialist. If Marx is a thorough going materialist, who embraces the theory of substance, then the conception of substance as idealist must go. If substance theories are irremediably idealist, and Marx embraces them, then he is not a materialist. Finally, if Marx is the materialist he is commonly held to be, and substance talk is idealist nonsense, then he cannot avail himself of such talk in the theory of value. The alternative to these sets of positions is that he is just hopelessly confused. It will be clear that I find the first of these options the most plausible.

⁵ Berkeley, G., *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues* edited by R. Woodhouse, (Hamondsworth, 1988) p. 54.

metaphysical rather than physical and has to do with the logic of a subject that persists through change. In the most interesting case of substances for social theory, composite substances, which possess both matter and form, this metaphysical status is reflected in the nature of that matter. Matter is not a kind of thing; rather, it exists only relative to form. Martin puts it like this:

The matter then, which at some time makes up a substance, just is that substance in so far as it can become another substance, while the form is that substance insofar as it is a substance of that kind rather than of another kind.⁶

These considerations come from the Aristotelian analysis of change, and particularly from the question of subjecthood in the substantial change of composites. But before we look at that, it is necessary to deal with Aristotle's opposition to the Platonic theory of Forms and the delineation of this particular Aristotelian theme in the work of Marx and Hegel. This has significance beyond a historical dispute between Aristotle and his teacher; the critique of false universals becomes operative against classical political economy and is an ever present concern in Marx's attempts to outline a broad theoretical starting point in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*.

Anti-Platonism - Aristotle, Hegel and Marx

Aristotle produces several arguments for rejecting the substance claims of Platonic Forms or universals. Both in the course of outlining the nature of substance in the *Metaphysics*, and in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁷ one of Aristotle's central arguments against considering universals as substances is that they fail since substance is tied to the notion of individuation:

the universal is also thought by some to be in the fullest sense a cause and a principle...But it seems impossible that any universal term should be a substance. For the substance of a thing is what is peculiar to it and does not belong to anything else; but a universal is common - that is what we mean by "a universal", that which is such as to belong to more than one thing. Of which individual then will this be the substance? Of all or of none? But it cannot be the substance of all; and if it is to be the substance of one thing this will have to be the others also; for things whose substance is one and whose essence is one are themselves one.⁸

⁶ Martin, C., *The Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas* (London, 1988), p. 65-6.

⁷ Aristotle, *Ethics* 1096b 8-26

⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1038b 7-14.

This passage parallels that in the *Introduction to the Grundrisse* where Marx discusses the possibility of beginning an account of social development with the category of production in general. This is discussed in Chapter Six of the current work, though I offer a brief outline here. This much discussed section of Marx's work, which is the main place where he outlines his method, is premised on an Aristotelian rejection of Platonism. This is why, although he acknowledges, in the *Grundrisse*, the common thread of human productive activity flowing through human history, his method, in *Capital*, begins with the investigation of the specific social forms under which this takes place. In this respect the *Grundrisse* differs from *Capital* as ontology differs from methodology. Marx's approach in the earlier work both parallels and diverges in interesting ways from that of Hegel, who, according to one commentator, himself attempts a synthesis of Platonism and Aristotelianism:

Hegel's notion of a spirit... is like the Aristotelian soul in that it is a form giving principle or potency inhering in things. To say that spirit "posits itself" means in part that it gives expression, embodiment and actuality to itself, just as the form or essence of a living species does for Aristotle in a living organism. Spirit's "forms" however, are "concepts" or "pure essentialities", universal natures which philosophers know by abstract thinking, and which are (in Platonic fashion) truer and more real than the transitory sensible particulars which exemplify them. For Hegel sensible particulars were created or "posited" by Spirit as the medium for actualising itself; without them Spirit's thinking would remain abstract - incomplete, not perfectly expressed, a mere potentiality lacking fulfilment. Concepts are what is truly real but concepts demand exemplification for their full actuality. Hegel's metaphysics thus ingeniously reconciles Plato's thesis that forms or universals are more real than particulars with Aristotle's insistence that forms actually exist only in particulars.⁹

Something similar is true of Marx too. Productive activity though, takes the place of *Geist*, as the analogue for the Aristotelian soul, and takes the role of a form giving potency inhering in the persisting social matter that is the only transhistorical existent for Marx. Yet, driven by his attempts to transcend the idealism of Hegel, he is drawn towards an elimination of the Platonic pole in this dialectic of universals. Or, to put it more precisely, he only permits concrete real universals; universals that are actually instantiated, and not merely logical universals within his ontology. It is the unreality of the universals proposed by the political economists which he highlights and against which he polemicises. His

⁹ Wood, *Karl Marx*, pp. 191-2.

overall approach is, in this sense, Aristotelian. Arguably, this is a handicap to clarity of exposition since the concomitant anti-Platonism leads him to tend to avoid any talk of society in general over time, as an enduring entity which undergoes certain changes of form. But such a conception is, and has to be, fundamental to him, to form a consistent viewpoint and so he pursues a universalistic treatment in the *Grundrisse*. It is certainly true of Marx's position that it rejects a standpoint of the uninvestigated, merely posited, universal category such as utility. In this manner he condemns Bentham for introducing the empty universal 'principle of utility' without relating it to the sorts of objects that exist in the world such as dogs and men. He states of Bentham, for example:

The principle of utility was no discovery made by Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvetius and other Frenchmen had said with wit and ingenuity in the eighteenth century. To know what is useful for a dog one must investigate the nature of dogs. This nature is not itself deducible from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would judge all human acts, movements, relations etc. according to the principle of utility would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch. Bentham does not trouble himself with this.¹⁰

Such empty universals can be filled out to serve an ideological function and Marx sees Bentham as setting up the English Petty bourgeois as 'the normal man' and then he projects and retrojects a yardstick of 'whatever is useful to this peculiar kind of normal man.' Marx wants to found his method on something better than this, and attempts to do so by advocating a position in which concrete universals are directly related to the objects to which they apply; in his case, concrete human beings and their particular needs, living in particular, specifiable social relations.

In a similar manner, Marx returns to the question in 1868, over ten years after his frustratingly incomplete grappling with this question in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*. Marx spelt out what he regarded as self evident: the distinctions between what was universally true of human social existence; continual production, and the distribution of social labour in definite proportions as a natural law; these were unabolishable features of the world and true of human society, just as human society; they were essential properties of that particular. For this reason he continues to insist on the existence of some universal necessities for social life, in the letter to Dr. Kugelmann cited above:

¹⁰ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 758 (footnote).

That this *necessity* of the *distribution* of social labour in definite proportions cannot possibly be done away with by a *particular form* of social production but can only change the *mode* of its *appearance*, is self-evident. Natural laws cannot be abolished at all. What can change in historically different circumstances is only the *form* in which these laws assert themselves. And the form in which this proportional distribution of labour asserts itself, in a social system where the interconnection of social labour manifests itself through the private exchange of individual products of labour is precisely the *exchange value* of these products.¹¹

For Marx natural laws 'which cannot be abolished at all' have a real ontological foundation in concrete universals. Production is one such, and has 'attached' to it, as it were, certain basic natural laws. But this material, which any human sociality is based on, is always enformed. Marx differs from other theorists in that he is unwilling to remain on the level of discussion of universals because of his Aristotelian impetus to find the specification and concretisation of such universals as labour, and production. Hence his unwillingness to accept the abstractions, and particularly the abstract universals of the apologists for the existing order of society. Such a attitude is Aristotelian, because Marx wants to rehearse the view in which universals have their fullest existence only as particulars. Both Marx and Aristotle work on the basis of an ontology of *universalia in rebus* (universals in things) rather than on the Platonic schema of *universalia ante rem* (universal before things). He critiques Platonism as early as 1844 in the *Holy Family* in the form of an attack on '*speculative philosophy*':

if from real apples, pears, strawberries and almonds I form the general idea 'fruit', if I go further and imagine that my abstract idea 'fruit' derived from real fruit is an entity existing outside me, is indeed the true essence of the pear, the apple etc., then - in the language of speculative philosophy - I am declaring that 'fruit' is the substance of the pear, the apple, the almond, etc. that what is essential to these things is not their real existence perceptible to the senses but the essence that I have abstracted from them and foisted on them, the essence of my idea - 'fruit'. I therefore declare apples, pears, almonds etc. to be mere forms of existence, *modi* of fruit.¹²

Marx goes on in *Capital* and the *Grundrisse* to expose, as he sees matters, the false universalism in bourgeois apologetics for the established order, and the

¹¹ Marx to Dr Kugelmann 11 July 1868 in *Selected Correspondence* (Moscow, 1955) p. 196.

¹² Marx, *The Holy Family* in *CW* 4, pp. 57-8.

inadequate universalism in Ricardo's account of the labour theory of value. It has been suggested by Moore,¹³ that in his move from abstract labour to the labour that is made concrete in commodities, Marx commits precisely the sin that he inveighs against in this passage from the *Holy Family*. However, his critique fails, as Arthur argues.¹⁴ These matters are considered in more depth in Chapter Five.

The Aristotelian account of change

A satisfactory account of change is important for social theory since to give an explanation of a particular development, such as a social upheaval, a war, the fall of a government, economic crises or the supersession of a particular set of social relations is to answer in every case, questions about why certain changes take place. Marx's concern in all his major works is fundamentally one of explaining social phenomena. The hints of prediction, widely taken to be indicative of his method as some form of determinism, arise only as dependent suggestions derived from explanations of what has already taken place. In particular, Marx's explanation of the genesis, development and decay of social entities parallels Aristotle's account, which distinguishes between two types of change, accidental and substantial:

Things are said to come to be in many ways and some things are said not to come to be, but to come to be something, while only substances are said simply to come to be. In other cases there must evidently be something underlying which is the coming to be thing - for when a quantity, quality, relation or place comes to be it is of an underlying thing, since it is only substances that are not said of anything further, underlying them whereas everything is said of substances.¹⁵

Here Aristotle reinforces the key nature of substance, albeit from a different angle to that in the *Metaphysics*. Division of the categories in this way and the primacy of substance derives from the account of change in the *Physics*. Involved in the account of what comes to be is the idea that it is a modification of what is: matter, by the addition of what is not: a particular form. There are three elements to any change; the underlying subject of the change, the pre-change state, and the post-change state;

It becomes clear that substance comes into being from some underlying

¹³ Moore, 'Marx and the Origins of Dialectical Materialism' *Inquiry* 14 (1971) p. 421.

¹⁴ See Arthur, C., 'Labour: Marx's Concrete Universal', *Inquiry* 21 (1978) pp. 87-104.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Physics* 190a 31.

subject, for there must always be something that underlies from which what comes into being comes into being. And the things that come into being do so in some cases by change of shape, (for example, statues) in some by addition (for example, growing things) in some by subtraction (for example, a marble Hermes), in some by putting together (for example, a house).¹⁶

This apparently straightforward account nevertheless raises a challenge to outline criteria of subjecthood. Any kind of change including substantial change involves the persistence of a subject over time. The question is then faced: What constitutes this subject? and, as part of the answer, what changes can it undergo whilst retaining this subjecthood? The question states a demand for the essence of a thing, and consequently, what changes can take place in that thing whilst it remains that particular thing, and what changes on the other hand make it a new kind of thing altogether. According to the account of substantial change, the essence of a thing appears to inhere in some way to the matter that is the underlying subject of that thing, since it is the matter that persists through changes of form. But in other ways it is the form of a composite that gives it identity: this stems from the fact that, for example, to count Callias and Socrates as two means counting them as men and to count them as men is to refer to their form. The ability to individuate substances, which does not belong to matter¹⁷ is a criterion of substantiveness and belongs to them by virtue of the form of the substance. There is then, a paradox at work here; the paradox of the unity of composite substances: How can form and matter be combined to give a unified substance? The notions of form and matter will play a large role in the argument presented in this thesis. This central role stems from noticing that these sorts of distinctions are employed by Marx when he points to the criterion of the form of production in the typology of societies:

What distinguishes the various economic formations of society - the distinction between for example a society based on slave labour and a society based on wage labour - is the form in which the surplus labour is in each case extorted from the immediate producer, the worker.¹⁸

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Physics* 190b 1-8.

¹⁷ See Hirsch, E., 'Physical Identity' for the view that matter lacks observational identity criteria. The idea is that it is impossible to give an account of the persisting identity of matter unless it is articulated, or made to stand out from its environment. This gives rise to 'a general problem about the concept of identity through time of matter insofar as that concept carries with it the problematical idea of a quantity of matter maintaining its identity through periods of non articulation' in *Philosophical Review* 1976 p. 379.

¹⁸ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 325.

The distinction between form and matter; hylomorphism, is thus key to Marx's mode of analysis.

However, it is sometimes objected that the Aristotelian account of the distinction between substantial and accidental change is a matter of convention. If this is the case, the argument about the essential role of the distinction between form and matter in social theory is weakened, since the fundamental nature of the distinction between separate social forms becomes a matter of the chopping up of history in the mind of the observer, not in the process of history itself. Marx appears to be committed to the idea that the distinctions he makes 'between the various economic formations of society' are objective, and not a matter of convention. Can this perspective be justified?

It seems plausible to say that, for example, trees cease to exist when they are chopped down, but not when they lose a branch. Indeed, for ourselves, as Brody points out, the distinction between changes such as growing taller, or even losing a limb, are obviously distinguished from our ceasing to exist. As a result, we do not insure ourselves beyond our death. There are, it might be objected, border line cases between substantial and accidental change; and this again is undoubtedly right. However, borderline cases exist in many fruitful philosophical distinctions. They provide interesting problems, but do not refute the applicability of the distinctions themselves, just as the existence of dusk does not refute the real and objective distinction between day and night.

Brody considers the more sophisticated objection that our experience comes to us without being divided up into experience parcels of this or that particular substance, as it undergoes change, and that it is we who, as a matter of convention apply a conceptual scheme. As Brody points, out this objection seems to combine two different thoughts;

- (a) it is a matter of convention that we distinguish out of our undifferentiated experience certain experiences that we describe as experiences of a tree.
- (b) it is a matter of convention that there actually is a tree that, among other things, we are experiencing at a given time.¹⁹

The second of these claims is altogether implausible, since if it were the case it would be necessary that the existence of trees was dependent on the adoption of a

¹⁹ Brody, B., *Identity and Essence* (Princeton, 1980) p. 74.

convention for distinguishing them. In the case of the critics of Marx's social theory, this would entail that the existence of capitalism was timed to coincide with its recognition as such. This would be a strange claim. If it were to be made explicitly then the 'relativist' critique of Marx might be more transparent.

The first claim points to the need to be specific about the principle of individuation that is used to pick out and articulate the entities that exist. I will argue that Marx's own method is to isolate kinds of entities through identifying behaviour in a particular way. Nevertheless, the problem of Marx's principle of individuation is a major issue in discussion of Marx's ontology. Leaving it aside for the present, we may work on the assumption that Marx's adoption of an objective distinction between accidental and substantial change is not straightforwardly open to the most obvious objection, that it is simply a matter of convention. The distinction between substantial and accidental change is twinned in Marx with the distinction between form and matter.

Form, Matter and the Paradox of Unity

Consideration of the relationship between matter and form in composite substances introduces an important problem in Aristotelian metaphysical interpretation, which Gill in her work *Aristotle on Substance* has called the paradox of unity. This paradox is the worry about how a composite substance can be one both in definition (which seems to imply that form gives a substance its identity) and over time (which seems to imply that matter gives a substance its identity). The problem arises since unity in definition requires that form and matter are not distinct components of a substance's formula, otherwise the substance is not an independent existent. But unity through time requires a matter that is distinct from the form it gains or loses. This persisting matter provides Aristotle with the conceptual ammunition he needs against the Parmenidean objection against the sheer emergence of substances and an answer to the question: 'where does X come from?'

Gill resolves this paradox by arguing that the matter of a composite substance survives only potentially. Form and matter exist in the composite because matter is *functional* matter; in particular the organs of an organism, and form exists as 'first actuality', the capacity of those organs to function. The definition of a substance is its function, so the definition of the composite is unified. The claim that pre-existing matter survives in a product *potentially* is critical and in line with what Aristotle says in *Metaphysics IX*, 8:

Matter exists in a potential state, just because it may attain to its form;

and when it exists actually then it is in its form.²⁰

For Gill, this means that the essential and some inessential properties of matter survive to modify the higher level construct. These properties are, however, out of phase with, and in constant tension with the higher level construct. The *telos* of the potential matter is to become actual matter; that is to say, the bare constituents of a composite tend to act against that composite and subvert its formal unity. This stems from a tension between, in Aristotle's words it is 'the principle of change (which) inheres in its matter,'²¹ and the principle of persistence which appears to reside in its form.

For Aristotle, potentiality is secondary to actuality because what something is potentially, is dependent on what something is actually. But actuality is also prior to potentiality in being since being is directional, teleological, and potentiality exists toward actuality. It is the existence of matter as mere potential, as something whose natural tendency (to become actual) is suppressed, that creates this tension. The *telos* of the potential matter is to become actual matter, that is to say, the bare constituents of a composite tend to act against that composite and subvert its formal unity²² There is therefore a need for an active unifying principle to maintain the unity of the (potential) matter and form. It is this principle that directs the further development of the organism. The continuing development of the entity is then caused by the entity acting on itself *qua* other and progressively differentiating the lower matter into the complex functional body. But at a certain point this becomes unsustainable and the central controlling principle of the entity is reduced in scope:

during decline, the creature attempts to act on itself *qua* itself and thus to preserve it in its present state, but finds it acting on matter that is increasingly other.²³

The supercession of the tension between matter and form, potentiality and actuality, uses up energy, and the active principle of unity becomes less and less effective. The organism becomes weak from its exertions and must sleep. After a time, the tension between potential matter and form all becomes too much for the

²⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1050a 15-16, also see 1088b 1, 1092a 3-5.

²¹ cited below from the *Physics*, footnote 25.

²² For Gill's interpretation of Aristotle this means the return of entities to their four elemental constituents, earth, air, fire, and water but we do not need to pursue this aspect of her study. In general, it refers to the return of an entity to its component parts, whatever those component parts might be.

²³ Gill, M.L., *Aristotle on Substance* (Princeton, 1989), p. 234.

maintenance of unity. The behaviour of the entity becomes increasingly erratic, the body becomes more and more difficult to control and finally the heart itself ceases to operate. The organism goes through a downward spiral of decline, decay and death. The relevance of this account to social theory in general, and Marx's account of the decay of the social organism that is capitalism, in particular, is developed in Chapter Seven.

It might be objected that an application of this account to social theory conflates the distinctions between natural organisms and social artifacts, such as social institutions deliberately put together by men. But Marx tends to argue not that that society is literally an organism. Rather, he suggests that it shares certain analogous aspects and can, as a result, be usefully theoretically captured as an organic whole. His reasons for doing so derive from an account of the nature of man informed, certainly, by Feuerbach, the conception of species being, and the transformative method that Marx derived from him. But it also involves some very basic and often unstated foundations which come from Aristotle. The overall perspective that Aristotle takes on the nature of man, for example as reported in *De Anima* can be overlaid on the account of the dynamic nature of composite things. Both incorporate consideration of actuality and potentiality, and of the constitution of lower order entities by higher order ones.

In Marx's later works, particularly in his discussion of economic crises there is an almost directly analogous structure between the pattern outlined above and the decline and decay of a mode of production. It is argued in Chapter Six that the *matter* of human society is human productive activity undertaken by concretely existing human beings. The *potential matter* of a social organism such as capitalism is the particular modified and suppressed form that human productive activity takes, under given social relations: thus the potential matter of capitalist society is the alienated labour carried out by the human beings in that society. This alienated labour is in constant tension with the social form which it constitutes and is subject to an active principle of unity: the law of value. The decay of a social organism such as capitalism is exemplified in the declining ability of the organising principle to do its job. Decay is marked out by declining penetration of the organising principle, the increasing fragmentation of the entity, and ultimately its collapse into its component parts. The crucial element in the transition of this model to the macro-social world is contained in the difference between the components of the entities. The matter of social entities consists of creative human individuals with intentions and aims. The more a social entity decays, the more dominant become the subjective intentions of human actors. The individual once again takes on 'the mantle of history.'

Ontology and explanation in metaphysical hylomorphism

The form/matter distinction has other implications which shed light on the nature of social explanation. It is commonly held that breaking down a complex entity into its smallest component parts, and seeing how they fit together is the best way (in some uncontroversial sense of best) of explaining why that entity behaves in the way that it does. Another way of putting it is that if we get down to what is ontologically basic, we naturally examine what is explanatorily basic as well; ontology and explanation fit together. But if we look at artifacts that possess both form and content such as a wooden box, we want to say that all that it is composed of is wood (and nails and so on) and nothing but wood (and nails and so on). But we do not call the box simply wood but wooden. Furthermore if we were to discuss the uses of the box we would refer primarily to the qualities it has as a box; its size, volume, sturdiness and so on, referring only to its woodenness when that made a difference to the other qualities. Working, as Aristotle, does from the logic of language use leads us to argue that the matter that makes up the box only exists in a derived form (as 'this-en') in the box. This is clear if we ask how we get from a wooden box to just wood. If we wanted to get our wood back, we need to break up the box into its component parts. Being made into a box deprives the wood of its full 'wood'-ness. The general point is that in the case of composites, matter is primary on the ontological level, but form is primary on the explanatory level.

This is true of the social world just as it is true of the middle sized composites of Aristotle. The picture is more complicated here because society as a substance is made up of other substances. Yet this complication is not a problem of category but of degree, since matter is generally worked up into a series of forms, each higher than the last. Marx adds sophistication to the Aristotelian picture, with a picture of forms in conflict with each other, so that the overall organism is not in some steady state but a continually unfolding whole, and this is a perspective derived from Hegel. Nevertheless, to anticipate the discussion of Chapter Eight, if this explanatory priority of form over matter is generally the case, it does help to explain, even in the absence of any other evidence, why Marx was not a methodological individualist, reducing complex social forms to their individual level matter, even in the absence of any other evidence.

Aristotle on the nature of the *polis*

The conception of society as an organic whole, constructed by nature rather than artificially put together, has a central place for both Aristotle and Marx. It encapsulates a certain view of the individual person as a *zoon politikon*: an animal

of the *polis*, and consequently as something that can only exist fully in society. This picture of the nature of man has ethical, prescriptive commitments concomitant to it. In particular, the organic conception of society adds weight to the idea that the good life for man is intertwined with the good life for men; in the form of the harmony, community, equality and friendship that the Ancients aspired towards as a realisation of the social nature of man. For it is the social, language using nature of man that makes him capable of a moral rather than merely a prudential life. It is the nature of man that makes this the case and especially (a fetish of both Aristotle and Marx) the criterion of delineation between man and the beasts:

Now that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal who has the gift of speech. ... the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.²⁴

This consideration has explanatory significance, reflecting relations between a whole and its parts, and relations between the individual and the state since:

the state is by nature clearly prior to the individual, since the whole is of necessity prior to the part.²⁵

Marx gives a qualified welcome to this piece of information. His account of cooperation within the work process: 'originates from the fact that man, if not as Aristotle thought a political animal is at all events a social animal.'²⁶ It is also the case that the conception of society as a natural thing, and therefore a thing with a nature, contrasts with the Enlightenment conception of society as an aggregate constituted by convention, contract or agreement as in the classical bourgeois view based on contracting individuals. Such a model is well known from Rousseau's *The Social Contract*, or Locke's *Treatise on Government* and is found at its most extreme in Hobbes' *Leviathan*. This contractarian approach is condemned by Marx when the political economist Wakefield resuscitates it, in passages saturated with sarcasm to be found at the end of the first volume of

²⁴ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a 7-18.

²⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a 19-20.

²⁶ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 444.

*Capital*²⁷. In and of itself, however, the alternative conception of society as natural has no revolutionary or necessarily dynamic content: it is neutral as to whether the society is in a state of conflict or not. For example, Aristotle's prime concern in the *Politics* is to reconcile the *stasis* of the *polis*, to achieve harmony between men and men, and man and his social environment, and this is at least part of the explanation for the appearance of social conservatism when Aristotle is viewed from the modern age. G.E.M. de St Croix sees this as a consequence of his historical distance from the possibility of any mental prefiguring of a future society:

For Aristotle and his contemporaries there were no prospects of fundamental change that could offer a better life for even a citizen of the *polis*, except at the expense of others. The genius of Aristotle as a political and social thinker is visible to us not only in his recognition.... of the structural defects of the Greek *polis*, automatically creating an opposition between propertied and non propertied but also in his generally practicable and often very acute ideas for palliating as far as possible the evil consequences of these defects - ideas which compare at least very favourably with the utterly impracticable fantasies of Plato. ²⁸

A more conservative version of the organic conception of society than Aristotle's is found in the work of Burke who iterates the central problem of an essentialist account of society: that of the relation between persisting social structures and component parts that are constantly changing. In *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Burke defends what he takes to be the British Constitutional settlement against the rampant egalitarianism manifested in France, and 'Certain Societies in London.' In Burke's view, inheritance of the Crown, the Peerage, class privileges and, above all, property, preserves in the constitution 'unity in so great a diversity of its parts.' But the inheritance principle rapidly becomes more than merely a useful policy for securing national cohesion, since it is inherent in the make up of mankind; 'the happy effect of following nature, which is wisdom without reflection and above it.' This manifestation of human nature secures the cohesion of the social system, and permits of its analysis in an organic manner. Through the natural transmission mechanism of inheritance, all the benign achievements of our ancestors are bound up and carried forward, snowballing into a 'stupendous wisdom' which, in true myth making fashion, generates a timeless unity of the whole:

²⁷ see below p. 62.

²⁸ de Ste Croix, G. E. M., *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* (London, 1981) p. 76.

Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom moulding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or young, but in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation and progression.²⁹

This supposition of a stupendous wisdom certainly gives the organic conception of society a conservative and mystical twist. It could well serve as the archetype for the historicism Popper attacks in *The Open Society and its Enemies*. But the fact that a conception of society as an organic whole can support ideological commitments of both left and right suggests that, in itself, the conception is ideologically neutral. If we accept that such a conception is an interesting, and ideologically neutral one, we can also assess other reasons for considering society in that way. One reason is that an account of a society as an entity that behaves in certain specific ways that are, at least in principle, predictable, is a component part of any attempt to explain the nature of society. An account of a society as an organic entity that behaves in certain specific ways and not in other specific ways and is an account of the capacities and incapacities of that entity. As such it provides the grounds for explanations and, in principle, predictions which bypass the problems involved in the justification of induction.

Such a form of analysis is open to the injection of mystical element, such as the talk of a stupendous wisdom referred to by Burke. But the analytical model of society as an organism is not fatally undermined by this; if it were, the costs to any typology of societies, not just a Marxian one, but also a Weberian framework or the identification of societies as 'post-industrial' would be very high. So the alternative to what Popper outlines as mystical historicism is to demystify it, by excising talk of a stupendous wisdom and replacing it with an account of the real integrative mechanisms that operate in the social world. It is not to rest content with a purely empirical account instead, especially if that account radically constrains the possibility of explanation. Whilst it is understandable to react against the superstitions of feudal and ancient thought and embrace the scientificism and empiricism of Enlightenment thought, it is important to avoid throwing out the organic baby out with the conservative bathwater.

²⁹ Burke, E., *Reflections on the Revolution in France and on the Proceedings in Certain Societies in London Relative to that Event*, ed. C.C. O'Brien, (Harmondsworth, 1969) p. 119-120.

De Anima and Social Theory

Aristotle's account of the soul in *De Anima* is a powerful antidote to those who conceive of the search for the soul as a search for an entity, with some kind of relationship to the body. Considered in this way it can throw some light on the theory and practice of reducing one macro entity to a series of micro entities. His view is that: 'If we are to state something common to every type of soul it will be that it is the first fulfilment of a body that has organs.'³⁰ or alternatively, that a soul is 'a principle of the aforesaid powers and is derived by them namely, by nutrition, perception, thought, movement.'³¹

Aristotle is impatient with attempts to specify the nature of the soul in such general terms, and more willing to spell out the different behaviour patterns of bodily organs, since it is clear to him that functioning is the mark of the soul. One commentator puts it like this:

Possessing a soul is like possessing a skill. A skilled man's skill is not some part of him, responsible for his skilled acts; similarly a living creature's animator or life force is not some part of it, responsible for its living activities.³²

For Aristotle, the relation between body and soul is one instance of the general relation between potentiality and actuality, which he discusses in the *Metaphysics*. Moreover, it is a version of a version of that distinction, since the body/soul relation exhibits the contrast between a capacity and its exercise. From this point of view:

it is as pointless to ask if the soul and the body are the same as it would be to 'ask of the wax and the shape or in general of the matter of anything and that of which it is the matter'³³

Thus for Aristotle, Cartesian considerations concerning the relation of mind and body would not have been seriously entertained. Along his preferred route, soul is a capacity of body so for a living thing to have a soul, and to live, is for it to behave in a certain way. But there is in Aristotle's account of the soul, more than one level of potentiality and actuality, capacity and its exercise. For a living man to be a good man is for him to acquire a higher order, more defined form of behaviour. A good man is one who fulfils his human potential and all men have the potential to

³⁰ Aristotle, *De Anima* 412b 4-6.

³¹ Aristotle, *De Anima* 413b 10-12.

³² Barnes, J., *Aristotle* (Oxford, 1981), p. 66.

³³ Aristotle, *De Anima* 412b 6-8

become good men; the potential to fulfil their potential.

It is precisely this feature of his work that Hegel commends in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*. He writes:

In Aristotle's teaching on the subject we must not expect to find a so called metaphysics of the soul. For metaphysical handling such as this really presupposes the soul as a thing and asks, for example, what sort of thing it is, whether it is simple and so on. Aristotle does not bother his concrete, speculative mind with abstract questions such as these.³⁴

The central feature of this account is that the questions posed by the soul are not resolved by relating different sets of *statements*: mind/brain or mental/physical, or by the reduction of one kind of *entity* to another kind. Instead the account of the soul is a matter of outlining the location of a capacity and the nature of its exercise.

There are two important conclusions for social theory which stem from this account. Firstly Aristotle offers a *de-reified* account of the soul and resolves what others take to be some kind of thing into a set of powers, or capacities whilst simultaneously remaining on the terrain of ontology, talking of what exists though not of what *things* exist. Ironically, this is the opposite of the tendency for which Aristotle is criticised by empiricist thinkers. One criticism, based on their preference for philosophical systems that are ontologically parsimonious, is that Aristotle needlessly fills the world with mysterious substances. The counter view consists of accepting, at least on Aristotle's authority and in his system, powers, capacities, and modes of behaviour into a basic conceptual framework rather than introducing them at a second level as *attributes* that ontologically basic *things* possess. It also indicates what is at stake in this inclusion and the depth and intensity of the distinction between those ontologies that are inclusive in this respect and those that are exclusive. Exclusion of powers, potencies and so on, as in the Humean (rejection of) metaphysics, is on this reading like the exclusion of life from living things.

Secondly, consideration of the Marx Aristotle parallel on the nature of reduction in general can be put to work in the debate about the reduction, of entities of one kind to entities of another kind, such as goes on in the debate over methodological

³⁴ Hegel, G.W.F., *Lectures in the History of Philosophy* trans. Haldane and Simpson (London, 1894;1955) Vol. II pp. 180-181, cited in David Depew 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man' *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* 1982 p. 143.

individualism in social enquiry. For some theorists this is elucidated by analogy with the mind/body relation.³⁵ But for Aristotle this would be like asking if the wax and its shape are one. The approach taken by Descartes, as well as more recent theorists, to this problem is to say that two sorts of things are related in a certain way. One is corporeal and the other is not; a separation that poses questions of whether and how it is possible to reduce one thing, event, or quality to another thing, event or quality. On this line of argument mental states 'map' to physical states, mind to brain, and soul to body and the task of philosophical investigation is to elucidate that mapping as type-type, token-token or just as mysterious.

The same approach is very often taken to the social world, implicitly, I will argue, in the metaphysics of methodological individualism. Here the questions faced by theorists are said to involve the reducibility or otherwise of, for example, the analysis of classes in capitalist society, and *a posteriori* class conflict in such societies, to the actions of individuals. Even if the need for such a reduction is rejected, we still seem to need to specify just what is the relation between social events, entities, qualities and so on, to individual events, entities, and qualities? How is *society* related to the entities *individuals*? But it seems likely that the Marx/Aristotle approach would be to reject this way of posing the question.

What Aristotle argues, in *De Anima*, is that mind is what body *does*: to be a living thing is to be capable of doing certain things and functioning in certain prespecified ways. He offers a *functionalist* account of mind rather than a *dualist* one. Marx, too, rejects the Cartesian programme of separating out the corporeal from the incorporeal substance when trying to determine the essential nature of the self. In *The Holy Family* he gives an indication not only of his attitude to dualism in the mind/body question, but also of his attitude to reduction more generally, when he endorses Hobbes' materialist view that:

An *unbodily* substance is the same absurdity as an unbodily body. Body, being, substance, are but different terms for the same reality. It is impossible to separate the thought from the matter *that* thinks. This matter is the substratum of all changes going on in the world.³⁶

When this account is brought into social theory, it helps to explain some of Marx's attitudes. First, it suggests that the search for some sort of connection between discrete 'social' entities and 'individual' entities is confused. Instead, on this

³⁵ e.g. Wright, E. O., Levine, A., and Sober, E., *Reconstructing Marxism: Essays on Explanation and the Theory of History* (London 1992). p. 117.

³⁶ Marx, *The Holy Family* in *CW*, 4, p.129.

account, society is what individuals do, and what individuals do, if they are not to perish, is produce. This view, that society, social entities and social qualities are what individuals do, is certainly more in keeping with the thrust of Marx's programme than the approaches which rely on an analogy with dualist philosophy of mind. It supports the bare claim that Aristotle makes, and Marx approves of, that man is a *zoon politikon* in the sense that sociality, collective action is somehow embedded in the nature of human beings. In this vein Marx warns that:

Above all we must avoid postulating "society" again as an abstraction *vis á vis* the individual. The individual *is the social being*. His manifestations of life - even if they may not appear in the direct form of communal manifestations of life carried out in association with others - *are* therefore an expression and confirmation of *social life*. Man's individual and species life are not *different*, however much - and this is inevitable - the mode of existence of the individual is a more *particular* or more *general* mode of the life of the species, or the life of the species is a more *particular* or more *general* individual life.³⁷

With an Aristotelian viewpoint this counterposition of individual and society is avoided.

There are other considerations that emerge from a consideration of the impact of Marx's early reading of *De Anima* on his thought. Some of these are brought out by David Depew's article: 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man',³⁸ on the nature of Marx's theoretical anthropology. He traces this theory of man through the prism of Hegel's lectures in the *History of Philosophy*, and back to Aristotle:

Hegel speaks approvingly of Aristotle's discrimination of three types of organic function and three souls corresponding to them: nutritive or reproductive, sensitive and intellective. Hegel also responds Aristotle's opinion that in man the lower souls service the higher and distinctively Human *telos* of theoretical knowing. ... Marx's critique of Hegel in the 1844 Manuscripts includes a rejection of precisely this anthropology. His alternative view, ... is one in which the intellective and sensitive functions in man are not seen as leaving behind the reproductive function but as making possible a distinctively human way of conducting that function.³⁹

³⁷ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* in *CW* 3, p. 299.

³⁸ Depew, D. J., 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's Theory of Man', in *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal* New School for Social Research (1982) pp. 133-87.

³⁹ Depew, 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's Theory of Man', p. 135.

In *De Anima*, one of Aristotle's aims is to develop a taxonomy of the three levels of soul that correlate to plant, animal and human life. Arguing that *psyche* is a principle of self motion, he outlines three kinds of this *de re* principle identified as the fulfilment of species-specific organs; the soul considered as nutritive, sensitive, and intellective. The nutritive soul appropriate to plants acts upon environing objects in such a way that in relating to them it destroys them, whilst the sensitive soul, derived from organs of sensation and movement and the intellective soul, derived from the capacity for self consciousness correspond to animals and humans respectively

Depew's central argument is that Hegel, whilst elaborating on this account misreads Aristotle 'double vision' in constructing an unilinear upward hierarchy of the three souls. This upwards account eventually 'becomes inseparably conflated with Hegel's own doctrine of Absolute Spirit.'⁴⁰ Marx, however, reads Aristotle more accurately, and adds to his picture a restructuring of the lower souls in terms of technical progress, self conscious activity and the ability on which self consciousness depends, of abstracting from particulars to universals, from members to kinds. Accordingly, the previously upside down conception of Hegel is inverted. Key to this is an account of the link between man's intellective ability and 'the capacity to apprehend objects as instances or species, where a species mark is one or more distinctive dispositional capacities.' This form of species *poiesis* or productive activity contrasts with the characteristic forms of animal production which must unceasingly re-embark on the process of need satisfaction, producing only to sustain the existence of each individual. Human production does not have these difficulties. It is dissimilar in that it 'breaks through the bonds of animal life because it reorganises the relation between the sustaining of life and production.'⁴¹

Animal life, by contrast, cannot grasp the notion of species itself and hence cannot intend its preservation by production. Depew calls this phenomenon 'animal individualism' applying the obverse notion of human production as an end in itself to the allegedly non-socialised producing man familiar in modern political theory. Such a conception, he suggestively points out 'is a conceptual impossibility, whose mere occurrence as a idea testifies to the distorted animal individualism of capitalist society'⁴² The importance of recognition of kind/member relations to an analysis of the nature and role of human production cannot, it is true, be exaggerated.

⁴⁰ Depew, 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man', p. 153.

⁴¹ Depew, 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man', p. 169.

⁴² Depew, 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man', p. 170.

But this conception of labour under capitalism as transformative activity is skewed, because Depew confines his attention to the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* without continuing his line of argument into the later works on political economy. He is cautious, perhaps overly cautious, over the extent to which extrapolation is possible from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* to the later works.⁴³

But such caution is unwarranted in view of the consideration that it is not just Marx's philosophical anthropology that reflects his understanding of Aristotelian hylomorphism, but also the development of that anthropology into the critique of political economy sustained through the *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and the *Theories of Surplus Value*. Whilst that critique is built on the foundations established in the philosophical anthropology of the early works, it adds considerably to that anthropology, not least by characterising the ways in which productive activity fails to be fully realised under the form of capitalist social relations. This involves a particular and historically specific account of the way in which that reconstruction takes place. The limitation of Depew's account is that he does not integrate a consideration of specific social forms into his picture, because he stays within the bounds of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Consequently he does not investigate the specific ways that Marx's reconstruction of the nutritive, sensitive and intellectual souls is overlaid by the social form which dominates them. *Vis a vis* Hegel, Depew argues that 'Hegel's world is a world that records rather than transcends the ontology of capitalist society - it is a world in which objects and nature are abstract entities and men are isolated Cartesian egos' which he contrasts with Marx's picture of 'man's socially cooperative and purposive interaction with a nature full of possibilities awaiting human transformation' - Hegel's characterisation of human metabolism and reproduction is precisely what human life, in fact 'looks like from the standpoint of political economy.'⁴⁴ But the way the world looks from this standpoint is, in some sense, a true reflection of the way that it is. Such forms of thought, Marx later argues are 'socially valid' and objective, in a historically specific sense, and for a specific social form.⁴⁵ While Depew is right about the nature of Marx's theory of Man and its close relation to the account offered by Aristotle in *De Anima*, he does not integrate it into the social metaphysics, themselves Aristotelian at root, that are to be found in the later works.

⁴³ Depew, 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man', p. 140.

⁴⁴ Depew, 'Aristotle's *De Anima* and Marx's theory of Man', p. 178.

⁴⁵ see below p. X, Political Economy and the Ideology of Capitalism and in particular the citation from Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 169.

CHAPTER FOURNEO ARISTOTELIANISM: PROSPECTS FOR SOCIAL THEORY

Central to Aristotle's perspective in the *Metaphysics* is the notion that scientific enquiry seeks to uncover the real essence of things, and consequently that scientific explanation is a matter of explaining non-essential characteristics in terms of essential ones. This notion forms the basis of a metaphysical tradition which runs through to Aquinas and Leibniz, amongst others. It is opposed by the view derived from the British empiricist tradition of Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley and Adam Smith's friend, David Hume, the most rigorous and consistent of the empiricists. In its developed form the empiricist view, to the extent that it permits the term essence any meaning at all, reduces it to definition. For a philosopher such as Russell, the meaning or sense of a proper noun is given by a set of definite descriptions. By reanalysing sentences, Russell believed himself entitled to hold that:

"Existence" according to this theory, can only be asserted of descriptions. We can say that "The author of Waverley exists", but to say that "Scott exists" is bad grammar, or rather bad syntax. This clears up two millennia of muddleheadedness about existence beginning with Plato's *Theaetetus*¹

When this method is extended to natural kind words, it entails the claim that the term 'essence' be employed, if at all, only as nominal essence, specifying the meaning of natural kind words (i.e. words that apply to the kinds of things that appear to exist naturally in the world; trees, cats and so on) in terms of a series of descriptions or appearances.

Recently this approach has suffered a two pronged attack, first through the elucidation of a causal theory of names and natural kinds by Kripke, Putnam, Wiggins, and Donnellan and secondly through the working up of 'realist' accounts of science by Harré and Bhaskar. These two philosophical innovations have had some influence on British Marxists, most notably in the series *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*². In this section I look at contemporary essentialism and point out some of its implications for social theory.

Kripke has demonstrated in *Naming and Necessity* the paradox that it is possible successfully to refer to someone, even if the definite descriptions turn out to be false. This works because the meaning of names is fixed by reference,

¹ Russell, B., *A History of Western Philosophy* (London, 1946) p. 860.

² Ruben, D-H., and Mepham J., *Issues in Marxist Philosophy* (4 vols, Hassocks, 1979).

not by contingent definite descriptions. Putnam and Kripke extend this causal theory of names, in which names have their meanings specified by having their reference fixed, to natural kind terms. They do this by showing that a theory that specifies natural kinds in terms of appearances, in the empiricist manner, fails to fulfil the necessary or sufficient conditions for the existence of natural kinds. Kripke argues that, for instance, our sense based conception of gold might be radically misconceived, and that an account in terms of some underlying physical structure is required to calculate the extension of gold. If we were to hold to the theory of descriptions we would be in danger of both misidentifying fool's gold as real gold, and excluding examples of real gold from the natural kind. Kripke reveals the problem involved in then accepting the nominal essence of natural kinds as accurate or as providing a sure footing for reliable knowledge.

Instead the evolution of our conceptions of natural kinds can and should swing largely away from a sense based account, whilst still remaining conceptions of the same natural kind. Consequently for Putnam, not only are Feyerabend and Kuhn wrong about the incommensurability of scientific theories, because meanings have independent objective existence, but a more scientific, more accurate account is one farther from, not nearer to, the sense based account. Putnam says:

The extension of a term is not fixed by a concept that the individual speaker has in his head...(but) depends on the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms and this actual nature is not in general fully known by the speaker.³

This is reminiscent of the 'more objective conception', a conception further away from the anthro-specific conception, that Descartes sees in the *Meditations* as the key to a non-sense base, and therefore potentially more complete, understanding of the world. This shared view that the sense based conception of the world requires correction by the understanding indicates that there is a rationalist element to the Aristotelian account of scientific ontology, and consequently, epistemology. This is unsurprising in view of some of the overlapping conceptions of epistemology between Aristotle and the continental rationalists and despite the radical differences in the approaches and substantial claims of each school in other areas

³ Putnam, H., 'Meaning and Reference' in Schwartz, S. (ed.) *Naming, Necessity and Natural Kinds* p. 132.

Competing ontologies and the possibility of explanation

The 'actual nature of particular things', the phrase used by Putnam, could have been designed to irritate those who take their philosophical direction from David Hume. A standard Humean objection to an account of science in terms of the concept of the real nature or essence of a thing is that it presupposes the legitimacy of an inductive generalisation.⁴ The charge is that concepts of power, capacity and nature inhering in a thing's essence involve generalisations, and the attribution of such properties therefore begs the question posed by Humeans of whether such generalisations are justified in the first place. The general claim of the Humeans, in this case, is undoubtedly right: propositions explaining events through an account of nature clearly do involve generalisations. Such propositions include saying that any and all dynamite explodes under appropriate conditions. This is also true of statements which involve the claim that something is *liable* to behave in a certain way, under appropriate conditions. For example, the Marxist claim that class struggle is endemic to capitalist society, though it may be manifest in different ways is to make a claim about how any and all such societies are liable to behave. So explanatory claims of this form do entail generalisations and appear vulnerable to Humean attack.⁵

But as Harré has indicated, the posing of the problem of induction in this manner is itself a function of the Humean ontology. The assumption of the Humean critic is that the problem of justifying generalisation is *ontology independent*. It is this assumption that justifies the accusation that Humean theory privileges epistemology over ontology since it shifts the focus from an uncritically adopted event ontology to the possibility of knowledge of the unobserved; from ontology to epistemology. But such problems of extrapolating or generalising customary modes of behaviour only surface on an event ontology rather than a thing ontology or a thing-and-its-powers. Harré calls the second a generative theory in which natural necessity is a product of the generative powers of potent things. On such assumptions extrapolations are guaranteed by natural necessity. Our knowledge claims about such necessity are mediated through the best current theory we have, and so they are not fully secure. But it is only if we take the claim that the world is not populated by enduring things with specific natures seriously, that the circularity objection has any force:

the real basis of the dispute between traditional Humean theories of causality and generative theories lies in the acceptance or rejection of the

⁴ Harré, R., and Madden, E., *Causal Powers: A Theory of Natural Necessity* (Oxford, 1975), p. 151.

⁵ See for an example of such an attack, Elster's critique of what he calls Marx's dialectical deduction in *Making sense of Marx*, pp. 37-40.

event-as-instantaneous-time-slice ontology as the specification of the ultimate or simplest entity to which analysis is directed.⁶

Whether we accept or reject certain ontological assumptions must be a reflection of the inquirer's estimation of the potential for explanation itself. Humeans are massively pessimistic about this potential; more pessimistic than the undoubted progress of science, even social science, warrants. For to choose a Humean ontology rather than an ontology of persisting things is to pose serious problems for the possibility of explanation *tout court*. Rather than investigating the plausibility of contesting explanations, the terrain of the theorist is redirected to the justification of explanation itself, and the sterility of this perspective is a product of an ontological option that is itself implausible. It is thus a debilitating fault that many social theorists either fail to be explicit about the choice of ontology or reject talk of ontology itself as a metaphysical mystification. This, rather than the acceptance or rejection of substantive theories, is the most significant *lacuna* in versions of social theory influenced by a Humean approach to epistemology, such as methodological individualist Marxism. Whilst ontological discussion may never finally be closed off, such discourse is essential to reorientate the more applied fields of social enquiry.

Modes of explanation presuppose certain ontological commitments: certain assumptions about the way the world is, in two ways. On the one hand, different ontological commitments throw up different series of questions to be answered, on the other, competing ontologies entail different conceptions of what counts as an answer.⁷ What is more, it is, at least in theory, possible to reconstruct a thinker's ontology on the basis of the propositions that are contained within the theoretical language used to describe social realities. We may look to a theory as it is best formulated to see what objects are required for its comments to be about. If we do not want to be committed to witches or phlogiston then we must not talk about them when we theorise about the world. Equally if a theory contains accounts of the development of value, classes and the capitalist social form, then we can take it that that theorist is committed to the existence of those entities, not necessarily as objects, but as relations, processes and potentialities that have a real existence in the external world. Disputes about theories and disputes about ontologies are therefore intertwined. Competition between theories, and competition about how best to read those theories, therefore involves considering which ontological commitments are most plausible. In that competition it is consequently essential to get the ontological commitment

⁶ Harré and Madden, *Causal Powers*, p. 142.

⁷ see the discussion above in Chapter Two.

clarified in the first place.

Ontology and epistemology in Humean and essentialist explanation

Kripke's causal analysis of names and its extension to cover natural kinds involves the claim that natural kinds are not determined by properties at all but by causal generative mechanisms. It has implications too for the acceptability of different modes of explanation. The traditional empiricist view links the status of the world to our ability to recover knowledge of it, by asserting that for an explanatory proposition P, if P is necessary then P is *a priori* and if P is contingent then P is *a posteriori*. This position founders on Kripkean objections, broadly speaking, because how one knows about a particular state of affairs may be radically dislocated from the nature of that state of affairs.

Suppose a light bulb fails to come on when I press the switch. For a conjunction of reasons I may take it that the bulb is faulty and replace the bulb. However it still fails to come on so I adopt a second explanation and replace the fuse. Both explanations are *a posteriori*, garnered from evidence I discover about the world, and I adopt the second on *a posteriori* grounds when I find out more about the world. But each is about natural kinds and natural necessity; the way certain things must behave under certain conditions. So the knowledge we gain in an *a posteriori* manner about the world can be knowledge of what is necessary.

This applies as much to social enquiry as it does to the causally potent entities of natural science. Suppose (somewhat extravagantly) that just as a light bulb fails to come on, the working class fails to seize power in Western Europe. I may explain this by virtue of the dulling effects on working class consciousness of the concession of welfare social democracy. But over time, that explanation unravels, with the unravelling of the welfarist consensus itself. I then look to the failures of working class political leadership as an alternative explanation. It is difficult to give precision to such explanations and they are in any case vastly more complicated than the explanation of the failure of a light bulb to operate. But they are of the same form and carry the same implication; that although the explanations are generated by empirical, *a posteriori* investigations they are explanations that account for the behaviour of a thing in terms of natural necessity. Of course whether the explanations are right, or, perhaps more usefully, plausible is another matter. But it is *another* matter. Kripkean analysis avoids the confusion in positivist thought between the meaning of a proposition and the grounds we have for accepting it. As Harré puts it: 'the fact that any given piece of evidence is dubitable does not carry over to the nature,

characterisation of, or meaning of the proposition itself.' ⁸

In social theory the evidential support for propositions about the nature of what social existents there are, and what connections exist between them is likely to be much more controversial than in natural science. There is, as Marx and Kripke both point out, some distance between essence and appearance, some open texture between parts and wholes, which may mean that social explanations are very often contested. Nevertheless, it would be heartening for social theorists to acknowledge that there is some sense in arguments about what the fundamental nature of the social world is, and consequently how its behaviour is best to be explained. In the case of Marx this implies taking his own ontological presuppositions seriously, as a first step to investigating the forms of explanation which they generate. Unfortunately, such an approach to the analysis of Marx is not common.

This helps to provide some answer to Callinicos' worry over the scientific status of realism.⁹ If we agree with Harré that 'the point of any ontology is that it makes clear the structure of some part of the world'¹⁰ then we must reject ontologies that fail to give grounds for theory development. Here Callinicos lives in the same world as the Humeans, in that he asks for separate criteria of the best theory, apart from ontological plausibility, or to put it another way, he assumes the ontology independent status of what makes a good theory.

Wiggins on individuation

It is clear that the problem of individuation; of how to identify continuing particulars over time and draw lines demarcating them from other persisting things, is key to a critique of both the Humean event ontology and to the conception of reality as a totality with every particular as internally related to

⁸ Harré and Madden, *Causal Powers*, p. 146.

⁹ Keat, R., and Urry, J., *Social theory as Science* (London, 1975) give a useful summary of the distinction between realism and positivism, arguing that both involve a conception of science as an objective enquiry, 'But for the realist, unlike the positivist, there is an important difference between explanation and prediction. And it is explanation that must be pursued as the primary objective of science. to explain phenomena is not merely to show that they are instances of well established regularities. Instead we must discover the necessary connections between phenomena, by acquiring knowledge of the underlying structures and mechanisms at work. Often, this will mean postulating the existence of types of unobservable entities and processes that are unfamiliar to us, but it is only by doing this that we can get beyond the mere appearances of things, to their natures and essences. Thus, for the realist, a scientific theory is a description of structures and mechanisms which causally generate the observable phenomena which enables us to explain them.' (p. 5)

¹⁰ Harré and Madden, *Causal Powers*, p. 137.

every other. In his work *Sameness and Substance* David Wiggins develops a neo-Aristotelian theory of individuation which is profoundly useful to the current enquiry. It indicates the connections between what it is to be a continuant on one hand and falling under a sortal concept which itself figures as a generator of characteristic modes of activity on the other.

The first position that Wiggins outlines is of opposition to the thesis of the relativity of identity. This consist in arguing that in reply to the Aristotelian question (for example) what was the thing that ran, a series of different and equally correct sortal answers (answers that identify the thing by reference to the sort that it belongs to) can be given. Thus, the project of tracing continuants over time is relative to which sortal concept in a list we subsume a thing under. On this line of argument, the identity of a continuant over time is relative to different answers to the question; 'A is the same *what* as B?'¹¹ What Wiggins argues is that although it may appear that there are a number of alternative sortal concepts under which a thing may fall, there is a more basic sortal term which gives it identity. Examples which seem to show that different sortal concepts such as boy give different criteria of identity arise from linguistic confusion:

They underline the need to distinguish between sortal concepts that present-tensedly apply to an individual *x* at every moment throughout *x*'s existence, e.g.. *human being*, and those that do not, e.g. *boy* or *cabinet minister*. It is the former (let us label them...substance concepts) that give the privileged and (unless context makes it otherwise) the most fundamental kind of answer to the question 'what is *x*?'. It is the latter (one might call them phased sortals) which if we are not careful about tenses, give a false impression that *a* can be the same *f* as *b* but not the same *g* as *b*.¹²

This important point leads onto a distinction of what might be termed necessary and accidental phased sortals. The former such as boy or adult describe sortal terms which every substance concept of a particular type must pass through in the normal course of events and those such as alcoholic or criminal

It may be useful to give some immediate guidance as to why this may prove significant to social theorists. The notion of phased sortals provides support to Marx's notion of the special laws, which are specific to the nature of an entity.

¹¹ Wiggins, D., *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 16-17.

¹² Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance* , p. 24.

These special laws govern different phases of the development, maturation and decline of a social organism. This is made clear in the Postface to the Second German edition of *Capital*,¹³ especially in Marx's approval of the unnamed Russian reviewer's exposition of his work. This exposition is in terms of working out the special laws that govern an entity since 'such abstract laws [the general laws of economic life] do not exist... on the contrary, in his opinion, every historical period possesses its own laws... As soon as life has passed through a given period of development, and is passing over from one given stage to another, it begins to be subject also to other laws.'

It is worth noting that Humean approaches to social theory tend to find this meaningless. Elster says of the discussion in the Second Postface 'that, on closer reading [it] appears devoid of content'¹⁴ Certainly the notion of special laws runs against the grain of interpretation which argues that laws (to be laws) are not temporally and spatially bounded. An obvious response is to say that the idea of the laws of motion of capitalist society presupposes the idea of special laws, and more importantly, that one way of identifying whether or not we are dealing with a particular kind of thing, such as capitalism, is to see whether those laws apply.

I use the considerations about identity under different descriptions to argue that it matters which description we apply to social phenomena if we are to explain them adequately. One implication is that methodological individualists and holists are not talking about the same things in different ways but talking about and explaining different things themselves. Moreover, I will argue that that there is a more or less accurate way of describing social phenomena, one that is more or less accurate in terms of the basic constituents of the social world.¹⁵

Having dispensed with the thesis of the relativity of identity, Wiggins goes on to state his thesis of the sortal dependence of identity

D: $a=b$ if and only if there exists a sortal concept f such that

(1) a and b belong to a kind which is the extension of f :

(2) to say that x falls under f - or that x is an f is to say what x is (in the sense that Aristotle isolated):

(3) a is the same f as b : or coincides with b under f i.e. coincides with b in the manner of coincidence required for members of f .¹⁶

¹³ Marx, *Capital 1*, (Postface to the Second edition) p. 101.

¹⁴ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 37, note 1

¹⁵ See, for examples of this, Chapter Eight below.

¹⁶ Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, p. 48.

At this stage, this is a claim about the nature of identity, rather than about the way in which we come to know about it. It involves the claim that statements of identity imply that if a is the same as b then a and b are the same *something*, even if we do not know what that something is. This reflects the distance posed by realist philosophical positions between ontology and epistemology. Lying behind the explication of identity in terms of sortal predicates is not only that it allows us to say what x is, and so to move on from the bare claim that x is an existent to the claim that x is an f, but also to be able to make a more substantial claim about what it is to say that x is the same f as y. This allows us to found:

the belief, which may be called the substance-assumption that for any identity statement whatever, there is always to be discovered not merely what is what we have called ... a phased sortal but also a substance concept appropriate to cover it; and that...a phased or restricted sortal predicate covering a true identity statement can always be supplanted *salva veritate* by a more comprehensive substance predicate, to yield an equally true affirmative identity-statement.¹⁷

What this does is to show that individuation is a matter of saying what sort of thing something is, in some basic sense, and that there are correct and incorrect ways of doing this. Combining individuating criteria with the rejection of the thesis of the relativity of identity, and the idea that substance concepts explain the principle of persistence of a continuant, then we can conclude that if there are several such concepts which appear to be competing, 'they cannot disagree on the persistence condition that they ascribe.'¹⁸

The link between a thing being a substance and it having a principle of continuity within it comes from Aristotelian considerations:

Unqualified coming to be and passing away takes place when something as a whole changes from this to that. Some philosophers hold that all such change is mere alteration. But there is a difference. For in that which underlies change there are two factors, one relating to the *logos* of the subject, the other relating to the matter that is involved. When the change affects both of these, coming to be and passing away will occur. But when the change is not in the *logos* but only in the qualities i.e. when the

¹⁷ Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, p. 59.

¹⁸ Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, p. 60.

change is a change in accidents, there will be alteration.¹⁹

Returning to Aristotle brings out one common theme: that substantial changes consist in changes in the principle of continuity or *logos* of the substance in question, while changes in accidents relate only to matter. For a philosophy such as Marx's that aims to distinguish more and less fundamental forms of change, this distinction is essential and fundamental. *Logos* is usually taken to mean speech but has extensive connotations; Castoriadis, in another context writes:

If there is to be speech, *logos* about the question, and *logoi*, arguments in defence of that speech, then there must be some definition, *logos* of the question and its terms and there must be some relation/proportion, *logos* between these; and the solution, too, must be arrived at by reflection *logos*.²⁰

Marx's method of abstraction is based on these contentions. He aims to identify the essential elements of bourgeois society, encapsulating 'every historically developed form as being in a fluid state, in motion, and therefore grasps its transient aspect as well';²¹ and to outline the persistence conditions of them, especially value and the laws that govern its different forms, such as capital and its accumulation. His polemic against Bailey is aimed at his unwillingness to accept the possibility of the objective existence of value which Bailey rejects as a scholastic (i.e. Aristotelian) illusion and his reply involves pointing out to Bailey that identity and difference can only be construed under a consideration of the *sorts* of things that the two elements are. Equally, and with the same metaphysical underpinnings, his row with the apologists of bourgeois society is directed at their unwillingness to consider the possibility of persistence conditions for that social form and their consequent raising of the temporally specific and temporary structures of that society into transhistorical verities.

Capital, the *Grundrisse* and *Theories of Surplus Value* are most naturally read as the uncovering of the *logos* of capitalism identified by abstracting the essential categories of that social organism through the cognitive capture of their principles of continuity such as the self-expansion of capital.

The nomological basis of natural kinds

It should be clear by now that the individuation of continuing things is a result of their ability to be captured under a substantial sortal concept. But the

¹⁹ Aristotle, *On Generation and Corruption*, 317a 21 ff.

²⁰ Castoriadis, C., *Crossroads in the Labyrinth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1984), p. 293.

²¹ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 103.

specification of a substance concept requires amplification. We have already heard from Aristotle that substantial change has to do with the *logos* of a subject, and Wiggins echoes this point when he argues that development of the thesis of the sortal dependence of identity consists in subsuming substance concepts under the 'Leibnizian echo of activity':

D(v): *f* is a substance concept only if *f* determines either a principle of *activity*, a principle of *functioning* or a principle of *operation* for members of its extension.²²

The prime candidate for this sort of substance concept are natural kinds. Putnam offers an alternative account of natural kinds to the empiricist dismissal of them, which states that a thing belongs to a certain natural kind if, given good examples of that kind, an adequate theoretical description of that kind applies both to the examples and to the entity in question. This account is a development in the Aristotelian tradition, expanding on the dominant role of nature in his account of natural kinds:

That which is a whole and has a certain shape and form is one in a still higher degree: and especially if a thing is of this sort by nature, and not by force like things which are unified by glue or nails or by being tied together, i.e. if it has in itself the cause of its continuity.²³

Such an account avoids the limitations of an account based on a list of qualities and indicates an important distinction between what is said to be natural and what is said to be an artificial construction. Natural kind terms are indissolubly linked to the typical forms of behaviour of members of that kind:

the determination of a natural kind stands or falls with the existence of law-like principles, known or unknown, that will collect together the actual extension of the kind around an arbitrary good representative of the extension.²⁴

The nomological basis of natural kinds means that the identity and development of natural terms is much more straight forward than the development of artifacts. This is outlined in the *Physics*:

²² Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, p. 70.

²³ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1052a 22-5.

²⁴ Wiggins, *Sameness and Substance*, p. 80.

..animals and their organs and the elementary stuffs... differ from what is not naturally constituted in that each of these things has within it a principle of change and of staying unchanged, whether in respect of place or in respect of quantitative change as in growth and decay, or in respect of qualitative change. But a bedstead or a cloak or whatever, *qua* receiving the designation 'bed' or 'cloak'..., i.e. in so far as it is the product of craft, has within itself no inherent tendency to any particular sort of change. But in so far as an artifact happens to be composed ... of whatever mixture of natural elements, it does incidentally, as so considered, have within itself the principle of change which inheres in its matter.²⁵

Marx was well aware of this distinction and the powerful role of nature in Aristotle's philosophy. He repeats exactly the same distinction in the *Grundrisse*²⁶ And this should come as no surprise. Social explanation in the Marxist tradition requires the elucidation of inherent tendencies to particular sorts of change. One distinctively Aristotelian element to such elucidation arises from the close relationship between natural kinds and their nomological basis. This is reflected in various philosophical slogans: that we encounter not a thing and then see how it behaves but rather we must encounter behaviour of a certain type in order to ascertain that a thing is a thing of a certain type. The stress in individuation is placed on an account of characteristic forms of behaviour and then seeing if such behaviour is exhibited in the objective world, constituting whether or not a thing is of a certain type. Hacking in 'Individual Substance'²⁷ outlines this as follows:

Which bundles are Substances? Only those bundles that are active in the sense of having laws of their own. Laws provide the active principles of unity. There is a tendency in much analytical philosophy to conceive things as given and then to speculate on what laws they enter into. On the contrary, things are in the first instance recognised by regularities²⁸

This tendency; to conceive things as given is not only apparent in the arena of classical analytical philosophy but is perhaps more prevalent in social theory. Just what the given things are might vary, for many that answer may be utility maximising individuals in Enlightenment political and economic thought. Most of the time such givens are not expressed in a brutal philosophical form. One

²⁵ Aristotle, *Physics*, 192b 8-28.

²⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 360.

²⁷ Hacking, I., 'Individual Substance', in Frankfurt, H., (ed.), *Leibniz: a Collection of Critical Essays* (London, 1976).

²⁸ Hacking, 'Individual Substance', p. 148.

occasion when they are is found in the work of Eugene Kamenka who argues in *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* the anti Aristotelian position that since Marx's underlying reality is to be society and no longer man, he is forced to treat man as no more than a mere reflection or product of social relations: 'The fundamental weakness of Marx's thought then, lies in his failure to work out a theory of classes and organisation and of freedom and servility in positive terms, in terms of the character of the processes and movements involved. What things *are* is prior to their possible adjustments' ²⁹

Marx's intuitive Aristotelianism

For Marx, the idea that things are recognised by regularities and not given before the identification of these regularities runs through his work in the notion that capital is a relation, the commodity is a kind of thing and that humans have a general characteristic form of behaviour, and a form of behaviour specific to the social relations of capitalism. The whole approach is reflected in both his implicit ontology and his explicit accounts in the *Grundrisse* of what constitutes a certain kind.

This throws into relief the need to understand the scope and importance of the notion of the teleological structuring of the social world, as Marx outlines drawing on Aristotle's understanding of teleology. This is further discussed in Chapter Eight of the current work. McCarthy argues, in *Marx and Aristotle*, that

In Marx's later writings, there is a methodological shift - but not an epistemological break from his earlier philosophical humanism to an emphasis on dialectical science acting as a critique of political economy... Both Aristotelian and Hegelian metaphysics, denuded of their ontology, now become important elements in the methodology of critical science.³⁰

But what he describes as a methodological shift, is much more as a working up of the ontology of the early writings into a more focussed study of the form of capital. It is certainly an unhappy formulation to speak of metaphysics denuded of ontology. Thus Marx is still concerned with a philosophical anthropology, but applies that anthropology *in its enformed state* to an analysis of the processes that constitute it. Furthermore, it seems to me that to describe Marx's shift of focus in a way that amounts to dropping of the Aristotelian ontology in Marx is mistaken.

²⁹ Kamenka, E., *The Ethical Foundations of Marxism* (Cambridge, 1961).p.163.

³⁰ McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, p. 117-8

Reasserting the place of Aristotle's ontology in Marx's work sheds important light on the conception of a developing scientific understanding as moving away from an account of manifestations and looking instead at essences, thus providing contemporary philosophical support for Marx's famous dictum that science is the epistemological outcome of the distance between essence and appearance. I hope to have shown that the accounts of individuation drawn from Wiggins suggest that the notion of special laws applying to entities of a certain kind is epistemologically essential; that is, necessary to any understanding of entities of a certain kind. It is also intimately attached to the notion of such entities as natural. If this is combined with the Aristotle/Marx conception of society as a natural substance, we have a justification for the approving notice Marx gives to an anonymous Russian reviewer in the *Postface to the Second German edition of Capital*.³¹

I shall expand on the social theoretic implications of this version of special laws in later chapters, showing how Marx uses particular Aristotelian formulations. But first it is necessary to trace the development of Marx's own conception of the constitutive elements of society. This, as has been argued, took place on a basis provided by his very early reading of the ancients. Nevertheless, it was through the critique of political economy that the ontology of capitalism was specified and applied.

³¹ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 102.

CHAPTER FIVE
MARX'S CRITIQUE OF POLITICAL ECONOMY AND ITS
ONTOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

*in five more weeks I will be through with the whole economic shit. And that done, I will work over my economics at home and throw myself into another science at the Museum*¹

Introduction

Marx's disdain for 'the whole economic shit', which was manifested more temperately in his detailed attacks on the vulgar economists of his day and the preceding decades, was matched in extent only by his antipathy towards capitalism itself. In *Capital*, the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Okonomie* and the notebooks collected as the *Theories of Surplus Value*, Marx attacks both the account of capitalism offered by the classical political economists and their 'vulgar' successors, together with the individualistic assumptions of this account. His *animus* against the savagery of capitalism is expressed in his survey of the inadequacies of the Factory Acts² or the account of the death and mutilation of workers in Irish Flax mills. It is at the same time, an *animus* against one of the core arguments of vulgar economy:

the free trade dogma that, in a society of mutually antagonistic interests each individual furthers the common welfare by pursuing his own personal advantage.³

He argues that this dogma can be subverted by simply looking at the disparities between the lives and incomes of capitalists and wage labourers, concluding that this common interest is not common at all. But, more generally, he insists earlier in the *Grundrisse* that these private 'mutually antagonist' interests are themselves socially determined interests, and that their form and content are structured by wider social conditions independent of individual social actors. Such naive utilitarian accounts of the market are indeterminate in expressing its outcomes. These outcomes are, instead, just assumed to be universally beneficial:

The economists express this as follows: Each pursues his private interest and only his private interest; and thereby serves the private interests of all,

¹ Marx to Engels, 2 April 1851, CW 38, p. 325. The more colourful translation is from McLellan, D., *Marx's Grundrisse* (London, 1971)

² Marx, *Capital 1*, pp. 389-426.

³ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 611.

the general interest, without willing or knowing it. The real point is not that each individual's pursuit of his private interest promotes the totality of private interests, the general interest. One could just as well deduce from this abstract phrase that each individual reciprocally blocks the assertion of the others' interests, so that, instead of a general affirmation, this war of all against all produces a general negation. The point is rather that private interest is itself a socially determined interest, which can be achieved only within the conditions laid down by society and with the means provided by society; hence it is bound to the reproduction of the conditions and means. It is the interest of private persons; but its content, as well as the form and means of its realisation, is given by social conditions independent of all.⁴

The first methodological error of the political economists, therefore, is that of reifying existing perceptions of interests into an immutable given, because of a failure to recognise the social basis of such perceptions. In particular, this criticism might direct us towards understanding the contemporary construction of interests within the dominant set of social relations, such as the generation of desires for useless objects through advertising, and the wider phenomena of commodity fetishism. Taking interests as given is a recurring error in social theory, precipitated by the difficulties many theorists have with encompassing the social construction of interests within a systematic theory. In a different way the same error is sometimes committed by game theoretic Marxists when they make the assumption of a pre-given rationality held in the heads of individuals who come to the market.

Combined with the view that the national economy is aided by the harmonious working out of antagonistic interests is the argument that it is the efforts of the capitalists themselves that enables them to accumulate capital. *Capital* aims to explain the circular flow of capital - surplus value - capital, but the genesis of capital in the first place, what Marx calls primitive accumulation, is also part of the story. One way in which the political economists do this is to regard the circular flow as natural and eternal, a *super* organic interpretation of capitalism, and thus to explain it in terms of some natural and eternal characteristic. Another is to falsify the origin of primitive accumulation as a historical phenomenon. That is, either political economists look at the circular flow of capital without asking where it comes from, or they give a false account of its genesis. Marx pours scorn on this dual error by telling a story soaked in irony:

This primitive accumulation plays approximately the same role in political

⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 156.

economy as original sin does in theology... Long, long ago there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent and above all frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living ... and from this original sin dates the poverty of the great majority who, despite all their labour, have up to now nothing to sell but themselves, and the wealth of the few that increases constantly, although they long ceased to work. Such insipid childishness is every day preached to us in the defence of property ... in actual history, it is a notorious fact that conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short force, play the greatest part. In the tender annals of political economy the idyllic reigns from time immemorial ⁵

Such an account bases itself on predications of wealth and class distinctions on individual attributes, rather than an explanation of the whole social system. The most explicit rendering of this is Senior's concept of abstinence; the view that it is because the individual capitalist holds back from consumption, not because he exploits wage labour that the capitalist is able to make profits:

in his *Outline of Political Economy* written for the instruction of Oxford students and cultivated Philistines, he had also 'discovered' in opposition to Ricardo's determination of value by labour, that profit is derived from the labour of the capitalist and interest from his asceticism, in other words, from his 'abstinence'⁶

For Marx, accumulation is not based on individual dispositions but arises from the systematic requirements of the capitalist mode of production, and so an explanation at the level of individual characteristics is merely one at the level of appearances. Such explanations are explicitly counterposed to an explanation in terms of a social mechanism:

Only as a personification of capital is the capitalist respectable. As such he shares with the miser an absolute drive towards self-enrichment. But what appears in the miser as a mania of an individual is in the capitalist the effect of a social mechanism in which he is merely a cog.⁷

Marx's method here is irredeemably social, in the sense that it looks beyond properties of individuals to the whole 'social mechanism'. This approach provides the explanation for his much discussed comment in the Preface to the First Edition of *Capital* that:

⁵ Marx, *Capital 1*, pp. 873-4.

⁶ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 338, note 12, see also pp. 298-9.

⁷ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 739.

individuals are dealt with here only insofar as they are personifications of economic categories, the bearers [*Träger*] of particular class relations.⁸

This is the *locus classicus* of Althusser and his followers. That school has been plausibly criticised, for incorporating a static structuralism in their wider interpretation of this perspective. But regardless of whether such a charge is justified against the followers of Althusser, it is not justified against Marx. He continues by outlining:

My stand-point, from which the development of the economic formation of society is viewed as a *process of natural history* can, less than any other, make the individual responsible for relation whose creature he remains, socially speaking, however much he might want to raise himself above them.⁹

One serious objection to the other standpoints referred to (perhaps Marx has in mind the vulgar economists) is that they invert the explanation of capitalists and capitalism. For them it is the actions of capitalists that explains capitalism, but for Marx, it is capitalism 'whose development, as a process of natural history' is what explains the actions and ensuing personal dispositions of capitalists. The dispositions of the capitalists are to be explained by the social conditions in which they find themselves, but vulgar economy inverts the explanation

In this respect, his critique echoes the much earlier 'Feuerbachian moment' in the development of Marx's own approach which is central to the *Paris Manuscripts* of 1844. The transformative method then, runs through from the early works to the works of political economy. In this way Marx's critique of vulgar economy is premised on his working out of his young Hegelian influences via Feuerbach's materialist critique of Hegelian idealism. The paradox is that the method of neo-classical economics, which borrows some of its assumptions about rationality and the proper nature of economics from the targets of Marx, is regularly conceived of by its advocates as hard headed positivism. In this respect it is opposed to the mystical Hegelianising of Marx. For Marx though, such an individualistic programme of theory and concept formation is categorised as another version of idealism, whose utility lies only in its ability to provide an ideological buffer for the established order. The idealism of the school lies in the extent to which it predicates actual social systems as the realisation of dispositions of the

⁸ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 92.

⁹ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 92. [my italics]

abstracted individual. The delineation of the market upwards from the rational consumer, the all knowing, entirely selfish fiction *homo economicus* is not just flawed because people are not like that, but also because the extent to which they do conform to the model is explained by the social context: capitalism, which the *homo economicus* model is provided to explain. That is, an idealised individual enters into the explanatory chain at the beginning, only to emerge at the end as a result. The link up of idealism and individualism in Marx's critique shows up the intimate link between his own contrasting couple of materialism and an ontology that includes social wholes. Marx rejects the claim that the social basis of the class division of capitalist society is personality, and additionally denies any *a priori* natural basis to the genesis of capital. Instead he points to the need for a historical analysis of its emergence; the genesis of capital:

nature does not produce on the one hand owners of money or commodities and on the other hand men possessing nothing but their labour power. This relation has no basis in natural history, nor does it have a social basis common to all periods of human history. It is clearly the result of a past historical development, the product of many economic revolutions, of the extinction of a whole series of older forms of social production.¹⁰

The contractarian approach to the genesis of capital, as well as to the origins of the state, is opposed by Marx's own ontology, because of his Aristotelian conception of man. When it rears its head in political economy, rather than politics, it re-echoes the falsification of the genesis of capital; a characteristic error of the vulgar economists. As a result, Marx is sharply critical of Wakefield's idea of an original contract:

Mankind have adopted a ... simple contrivance for promoting the accumulation of capital,' which, of course, had dangled in front of them since the time of Adam as the ultimate and only goal of their existence, 'they have divided themselves into the owners of capital and owners of labour ... This division was the result of concert and combination'. In short: the mass of the population expropriated itself in honour of 'the accumulation of capital.'¹¹

This account, albeit caricatured by Marx, obscures the true nature of the process of the primitive accumulation of capital. In fact this took place through the migration to towns, the series of enclosures and clearances, the emergence of

¹⁰ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 27.

¹¹ Marx, *Capital 1*, pp. 933-4.

landless labourers and a process of the 'expropriation of the mass of the people from the soil.'¹²

There is a philosophical grounding for this falsification of history. It coincides with the superficial reading of the nature of present social reality. The consensual estimation of the origin of capital underpins a consensual reading of the currently existing system. Against this, Marx argues that the analysis of specifically capitalist production shows that the apparent equality of exchange under capitalism is only apparent. It is an illusory reflection of the capitalist relation of dominance and subordination underlying it, while the original, exploitative relation, generated through the process of capital accumulation, remains intact:

This destroys the last vestiges of the *illusion* so typical of the relationship when considered superficially, that in the circulation process, in the market place, two equally matched *commodity owners* confront each other, and that they, like all other *commodity owners* are distinguishable only by the material content of their goods, by the specific use value of the goods they desire to sell each other or, in other words, the *original* relation remains intact, but survives only as the illusory reflection of the capitalist relation underlying it.¹³

The ontological suppositions are at their most exposed here and *The Results of the Immediate Process of Production* is analysed in more detail below. The suppositions emanate from the comprehensive way in which the political economists' argument is condemned. It is *ahistorical* in that it is not rooted in an account of historical development, *individualist* in that it generalises social phenomena from a supposed explanation of the micro level behaviour of individual capitalists and *idealist* in the sense that it explains primitive accumulation in terms of naturally existing ideas and proclivities such as diligence or laziness.

The Method of Analysis of Political Economy

Marx distinguishes between Smith and Ricardo and the vulgar economists who followed them; Marx attacks the 'vulgar' economists who do nothing but reflect the superficial relations of capitalism:

Let me point out once and for all that by classical political economy I mean all the economists who, since the time of W. Petty, have investigated the real internal framework of bourgeois relations to production, as opposed to

¹² Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 94.

¹³ Marx, *Capital 1*, (Results of the Immediate Process of Production), pp. 1062-3

the vulgar economists who flounder around within the apparent framework of those relations, ceaselessly ruminate on the materials long since provided by scientific political economy and seek there plausible explanations of the crudest phenomena for the domestic purposes of the bourgeoisie. Apart from this the vulgar economists confine themselves to systematising in a pedantic way, and proclaiming for everlasting truths, the banal and complacent notions held by the bourgeois agents of production about their own world, which is to them the best possible one.¹⁴

For the Russian commentator Rubin and Marx himself, the degeneration of economic thought reflected the coming of age of bourgeois power itself:

With the year 1830 there came the crisis which was to be decisive. In France and England the bourgeoisie had conquered political power. From that time on, the class struggle took on more and more explicit and threatening forms, both in practice and in theory. It sounded the death knell of scientific bourgeois economics.¹⁵

For Marx the vulgar economists return to the mercantilist idea of 'profit upon alienation'; of buying cheap and selling dear. But in order to overcome this view only a distinction between the local and global is required - a total view. For, as Marx points out; 'the capitalist class of a given country cannot, taken as a whole, defraud itself.'¹⁶

A central error of the vulgarians therefore, is that they generalise from a single act of exchange. While Marx's view is holistic, this does not mean that he analyses historical economic change and development solely in terms of abstract categories; his understanding is assisted by a more direct and sensuous approach, conditioned by the understanding that the vulgar economists get themselves into trouble because of problems within their categorical and ontological framework. If the assumption is made that there is a class of buyers who do not sell, it may appear that profit upon alienation can provide an adequate explanation of the origin of surplus value. Pursuing this issue, Marx points out that one of the ways to uphold the idea of the exchange of non-equivalents is through the displacing of categories from their instantiation;

Let us therefore keep within the limits of the exchange of commodities, where sellers are buyers, and buyers are sellers. Our perplexity may

¹⁴ Marx, *Capital 1*, pp. 174-5 note 34

¹⁵ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 97.

¹⁶ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 266.

perhaps have arisen from conceiving people merely as personified categories, instead of as individuals.¹⁷

There is an apparent contradiction with his stand-point outlined in the Preface to the second edition of *Capital*, since there Marx says that his method is precisely the one he now appears to criticise. Marx's approach, therefore, needs to be unravelled.

There are a number of ways to resolve this paradox. First we could suggest that Marx did not have a consistent methodological strategy and was confused about what he was attempting. Second, we might argue that the contradiction is apparent and not real. Marx's general criticism of the 'vulgar' economists is that their method is ahistorical, and of the classical political economists that their method is categorially inadequate. The ahistoricism of the vulgar economists lies in their separation of transcendental economic categories from human social and productive activity, generalising them as eternal, and explaining them by reference to human dispositions. The criticism of this manoeuvre is drawn from the Aristotelian critique of Platonic false universals, hovering above the real individuals. And here Marx is anxious to show that the filling out of the roles of buyer and seller is done by real human beings who provide an overlapping set between the two categories.¹⁸ Since Marx aimed his attack on the categories of bourgeois thought, and particularly on their ahistoricism, it should not be surprising that he prefers a return to 'sensuous reality' in order to avoid the obfuscations of the vulgarians. That is to say, the individualist approach of the vulgar economist creates a picture that is qualitatively worse than the common sense non-abstracted focus on actually existing individuals.

Marx's critique of the political economists: Bailey

It is in his consideration of Bailey, that the link between Marx's methodological critique of the vulgar economists and his ontological presuppositions is at its most explicit. He notes Bailey's desire to formulate a scientific account of price determination whilst rejecting the labour theory of value. Bailey is, in fact, paid a back-handed compliment by Marx:

¹⁷ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 265

¹⁸ It might be suggested that this is a case of categorical inadequacy - that the notions of buyer and seller are inadequately conceptualised since the vulgar economists forget that as categories they presuppose one another. This is certainly true, but if this was the source of Marx's primary attack on the mercantilist error, then he could have dispensed of talk of real individuals. It is not just that buyers theoretically presuppose sellers, it is also the case that they really are exemplified in individuals.

He was the first to give a more accurate account of the measure of value, that is, in fact, of one of the functions of money, or money in a particular determinate form. ¹⁹

But his failure to recognise the preconditions for such an account and the distinction 'between measure of value' expressed in money as a commodity along with other commodities, and 'the immanent measure and substance of value' vitiates his approach. For Bailey, the idea that there is an independent existence of value is a scholastic²⁰ (meaning Aristotelian) invention of the economists and the answer to the existence of value lies in price. For Marx, instead, it is the independent existence of value that permits the homogeneity of commodities to emerge, allowing them to be compared as exchange values, and therefore, this independent existence is a precondition for the development of money. Bailey expresses both his individualism and his ontological commitments in his belief that the price of a commodity and its value are determined at the point of exchange and not at the point of production. For Marx, Bailey's theory is fetishistic for

he conceives value, though not as a property of the individual object (considered in isolation), but as a *relation of objects to one another*, while it is only a representation in objects, an objective expression, of a relation between men, a social relation, the relationship of men to their reciprocal productive activity. ²¹

In Marx's view, this results from taking for granted the appearance of value as price rather than attempting to investigate its essence:

This is how things appear directly. And Bailey clings to this. The most superficial form of exchange value, that is the quantitative relationship in which commodities exchange one for the other constitutes, according to Bailey, their value. The advance from the surface to the core of the problem is not permitted.²²

For Marx, directly following Aristotle's account of exchange in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,²³ there must be something in respect of which exchangeable commodities are commensurable, which provides criteria to distinguish and compare the two entities:

¹⁹ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* (London, 1972) p. 133.

²⁰ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* (London, 1972) p. 139.

²¹ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* p. 147.

²² Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* p. 139.

²³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics 1132b 21-1134a 16*.

What is the distance between the syllable A and a table? The question would be nonsensical. In speaking of the distance of two things, we speak of their difference in space. Thus we suppose both of them to be contained in space, to be points of space. Thus we equalise them as being both existences of space, and only after having them equalised *sub specie spatii* we distinguish them as different points of space. To belong to space is their unity.²⁴

Marx continues this point by analogy with geometry. If a triangle and a parallelogram are equal in area this means that the area of the triangle is $\frac{h b}{2}$

(where h is the height and b the base of the triangle) and that the area of the parallelogram is likewise $\frac{h b}{2}$. Therefore:

2

As areas, the triangle and the parallelogram are here declared to be equal, to be equivalents, although as a triangle and as a parallelogram they are different. In order to equate these different things with one another, each must represent the same common element regardless of the other. If geometry, like the political economy of Mr. Bailey, contented itself with saying that the equality of the triangle and of the parallelogram means that the triangle is expressed in the parallelogram and the parallelogram in the triangle it would be of little use.²⁵

Marx insists, that is, that to compare two things as identical in some respect is to group them under a sortal concept; to say that a is the same f as b . The triangle and the parallelogram are both spatial figures; by the same token, he argues, commensurate commodities are commensurate as values. He also indicates that the employment of the substance concept f is explanatory, since it allows us to make substantial claims about each object. To say that a and b both take up space, have identical areas, or have the same value, allows us to go on to make *supplementary* claims about the two things; to claim that they are such and such a distance apart, that their areas are given by $h b/2$, or to say that they contain equal amounts of abstract social labour. If we recall Wiggan's belief (the substance assumption) that for any identity whatsoever, there is a substance concept and not just a phased or restricted sortal concept to cover it, the search is on to find the most fundamental substance concept, which in turn is likely to allow the

²⁴ Marx, *CW* 32 p. 330 (which notes that this passage is in English in the original), and *Theories of Surplus Value* Vol. Three (Moscow, 1972) p. 143

²⁵ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* Volume Three p. 144.

deepest explanatory insights into the nature of the particulars *a* and *b*. Marx's irritation with Bailey is produced by his failure to attempt this task of searching for the most fundamental substance concept. Correspondingly, his regard for Ricardo consists in admiration for his attempt albeit unsuccessful pursue just this enquiry. The recurring focus of Marx's critique is Bailey's reduction of the essence of a thing to its expression, and it is backed by a whole series of examples that would not be out of place in a text of contemporary neo-Aristotelianism:

(As impossible as it is to designate or express a thought except by a quantity of syllables. Hence Bailey concludes that a thought is - syllables.)²⁶

This inability to root his explanation of value in the substance of commodities leads Bailey to construct an idealised and subjective explanation for the cause of value. So the *cause* of value is what transforms use values into exchange values the objective social process which secures the existence of abstract labour, the substance and the immanent measure of value. Bailey writes, in contrast, that:

Whatever circumstances ... act with assignable influence, whether mediately or immediately, on the mind in the interchange of commodities may be considered as causes of value.²⁷

If value is the same as price, and price is determined by the relations of supply and demand, then a whole series of subjective factors such as tastes enter into the explanation of value. This is in fact the way in which elementary economics explains price, insofar as it explains it at all. Tastes are one of the many factors which determine the demand curve for a product. But changes in tastes can only be discovered retrospectively, when a change in price leads the observer to suspect that something has changed behind the scenes. Marx's stance by contrast, reemphasises the objective existence of value irrespective of the circumstances affecting the mind of those who buy and sell:

Their "mind", their consciousness, may be completely ignorant of, unaware of the existence of, what in fact determines the value of their products or their products as values. They are placed in relationships that determine their thinking but they may not know it....He [Bailey] transfers the problem

²⁶ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* Volume Three p. 146.

²⁷ Bailey, S. *A Critical Dissertation on the Nature, Measures, and Causes of Value* (London, 1825) pp. 182-83 cited by Marx in *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* p. 163.

into the sphere of consciousness because his theory has got stuck. ²⁸

This account of the cause of value as something many-sided and subjective is a real step back from the account offered by Ricardo and a labour theory of value. Not surprisingly, the individualism, subjectivity, and the consequent indeterminacy in the determination of value have ideological repercussions.

Political Economy and the Ideology of Capitalism

The implications and importance of the individualist assumptions of the vulgar economists lie in the support which such principles provide for existing market relations. The bourgeois 'Rights of Man' provide a veneer of equality over inequitable social relations:

The sphere of circulation or commodity exchange, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour power goes on, is a very Eden of the innate rights of man. It is the exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.²⁹

So for Marx the vulgar economists are apologists for the status quo, and dread the sort of scientific analysis that was pursued by Smith and Ricardo. For straightforward reasons of power politics, they retreat from any attempt to penetrate the real nature of the capitalist organism and its production of surplus value. The vulgar economists such as Roscher draw on the 'more or less plausible excuses offered by the capitalists'. This is because they exhibit:

besides their real ignorance, an apologetic dread of a scientific analysis of value and surplus-value which might produce a result unpalatable to the powers that be.³⁰

In marked contrast, Marx argues that the attitude of the classical political economists mean that their enquiries are of real worth and do not stem from some sort of a socio political imperative. Their theoretical positions are more intriguing, because the categories of bourgeois economics are in a limited sense, valid. The 'absurdities' that Marx highlights in his account of money are absurdities that really inhere in bourgeois society:

The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this

²⁸ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* Volume Three p. 163.

²⁹ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 280.

³⁰ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 326 note six

kind. They are forms of thought which are socially valid and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production.³¹

The categories of bourgeois economics are read off from the forms of market society and are, in this narrow sense, appropriate to them. But they are historically specific. When applied across distinct forms of production they become ahistoric empty Platonic forms. This is how it is possible for political economy to come up with a description of market relations that is to a degree accurate and even instrumental without entering into any of the questions critical to an understanding of bourgeois society:

Political economy has indeed analysed value and its magnitude, however incompletely, and has uncovered the content concealed within these forms. But it has never once asked the question why this content has assumed this particular form, that is to say, why labour is expressed in value, and why the measurement of labour by its duration is expressed in the magnitude of the value of the produce.³²

In short, classical political economy falls down because it fails to explain the value expression of labour, and the source of this lies in its categorial inadequacy. This inadequacy that takes us into the realm of ontology, since what ontology consists of is the attempt to devise categories that generate an accurate explanation of the social world.

Marx and the classical political economists on the labour theory of value

For Marx the classical economists, in particular Smith and Ricardo are a much more serious proposition. They were the predecessors of Marx who approached most closely to an adequate understanding of capital, insofar as they utilised a labour theory of value. But their accounts were ultimately inadequate. Their fundamental problem was that they conceived of the value form as natural and transhistorical. As a result, the main consideration of their work was quantitative and they missed the problem of how it is that the product of labour takes the form of a commodity, and appears as a 'value' of 'things'. Thus, for Smith and Ricardo, there is no connection between the labour theory of value and the fetishisation and

³¹ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 169.

³² Marx, *Capital 1*, pp. 173-4

reification of social relations, and consequently no attempt to progress theoretically from social relations to determining the nature of the mode of production. Smith was the first economist to develop a labour theory of value but later abandoned it for the 'Trinity Formula,' a development and degeneration that Marx saw as itself an expression of the actual development of capitalism. Marx then, rejected the trinity formula, seeing it as obfuscating real relations that enform the labour process:

When the political economists treat surplus value and the value of labour-power as fractions of the value product... they conceal the specific character of the capital-relation, namely the fact that variable capital is exchanged for living labour power, and that the worker is accordingly excluded from the product. Instead of revealing the capital relation they show us the false semblance of a relation of association, in which workers and capitalists divide the product in proportion to the different elements which they respectively contribute towards its formation.³³

Ricardo, however, kept and developed Smith's labour theory of value and attempted to generalise its applicability from the early 'rude state' of society to bourgeois society itself. But Ricardo failed to reach the understanding that value is not derived from labour alone but from socially necessary labour. Because he had no concept of abstract or socially necessary labour time, Ricardo found no exact relation between value and labour time. Marx isolated this error:

All commodities can be reduced to labour as their common element. What Ricardo does not investigate is the specific form in which labour manifests itself as the common element of commodities. ³⁴

This is rooted in the failings of Ricardo's method which looked to find labour concentered in an object, because he failed to get beyond the individual commodity, embodying a specific amount of a particular type of labour³⁵ to the social processes and networks of commodity producing society, Ricardo was therefore unable to resolve the problem of how labour determines value. Two contemporary Marxist economists put the ensuing possibilities as follows;

Two possible resolutions of Ricardo's contradiction exist. One way out of the dilemma is to abandon the first approximation of the labour-embodied

³³ Marx, *Capital 1*, pp. 670-1.

³⁴ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* p.138

³⁵ Marx on Ricardo's mistake is in *Theories of Surplus Value Volume Three* p. 131 see also p. 137 and p. 138-9.

theory of value in search of some other account of the magnitude of exchange value. Such a path historically comprised the retreat from science to vulgar economy. The other possible resolution involves the complete reconceptualisation of value, a recasting of the theory of value as an abstraction rather than as a hypostatized assumption, wherein its significance and status is such that its apparent inconsistencies can be recreated as the expressions of the real contradictions of capitalist society.³⁶

The second path is the option of Marx, since Ricardo's *solution* (undifferentiated labour) to the problem of value became his *problem*. It is resolved by a method which penetrates the commodity form to investigate a social whole with distinct laws of development. Such a penetration is necessary because

Value, ... does not have its description branded on its forehead; it rather transforms every product of labour into a social hieroglyphic. Later on, men try to decipher the hieroglyphic, to get behind the secret of their own social product: for the characteristic which objects of utility have of being values is as much men's social product as is their language.³⁷

A commodity does not possess a value corresponding to the amount of labour time logged in that particular individual commodity but is determined by the socially necessary labour time for that kind of commodity. This double view of labour gives rise to a paradox, since the:

labour which constitutes the substance of value is not only uniform, simple, average, labour; it is the labour of a private individual represented in a definite product. However, the product as value must be the embodiment of *social* labour and, as such, be directly convertible from one use value into all others ... Thus the labour of individuals has to be directly represented as its opposite, social labour; this transformed labour is, as its immediate opposite, abstract, general, labour which is therefore represented in a general equivalent. Only by its alienation does individual labour manifest itself as its opposite.³⁸

Ricardo fails to see this because his individualism constrains his vision to individual concrete labours. In Marx's resolution of this paradox he introduces an

³⁶ Himmelweit, S., and Mohun, S., 'The Anomalies of Capital', in *Capital and Class* 6 (1978) p.72

³⁷ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 167.

³⁸ Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* Volume Three pp. 135-6.

original category; abstract labour, which offers a completely new way of conceptualising human productive activity. It is a new kind of social process, with new ways of behaving and is manifested through the customary and essential mode of behaviour of commodities. Marx embraces abstract labour in a profoundly Aristotelian way. The concept involves the contrast between essence and appearance, the relationship between potentiality and actuality, and the idea of a customary mode of behaviour by means of which things can be identified as of a certain kind. In addition, abstract labour is the solution to an Aristotelian problem, the problem of the commensurability of commodities and it is articulated in an Aristotelian way.

But there is a twist. Abstract labour appears to be an abstraction; a Platonic universal which, somehow, makes its appearance in the diverse products of human labour that exist in the bourgeois social form. Marx thus appears vulnerable to the Aristotelian critique of Platonism, or its nineteenth century variant, his own critique of Hegelian speculation whose 'essential character' is 'the operation called comprehending the *Substance* as *Subject*.'³⁹ This is indeed the criticism made of Marx's novel concept by Moore, who compares the derivation of the idea of fruit from apples and pears, and which Marx condemns, to the derivation of abstract labour from the commodities that exchange.⁴⁰ Is Marx employing a Platonic false universal at the heart of this theory of value?

Moore's parallel is unwarranted. The key distinction between the two abstractions is that the first takes place in thought and the second takes place in the market place. Marx summarises this innovative analysis in the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

This reduction appears to be an abstraction but it is an abstraction which is made every day in the social process of production, The conversion of all commodities into labour time is no greater an abstraction and is no less real, than the the resolution of all organic bodies into air.⁴¹

But the overall basis of his claim for the actuality of the process of abstract labour in bourgeois society rests on an account of the organic inter relatedness of that specific form:

this abstraction of labour as such is not merely the mental product of a

³⁹ Marx, *The Holy Family* in *CW* 4, p. 58.

⁴⁰ Moore, 'Marx and the Origins of Dialectical Materialism' *Inquiry* 14 (1971) p. 421.

⁴¹ Marx, *Contribution to a Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1970) p. 30.

concrete totality of labours. Indifference towards specific labours corresponds to a form of society in which individuals can with ease transfer form one labour to another, and where the specific kind is a matter of chance for them, hence of indifference. Not only the category, labour, but labour in reality has here become the means of creating wealth in general, and has ceased to be organically linked with particular individuals in any specific form.... The simplest abstraction, then, which modern economics places at the head of its discussions, and which expresses an immeasurably ancient relation valid in all forms of society, nevertheless achieves practical truth as an abstraction only as a category of the most modern society.⁴²

This 'ancient relation' - so ancient as to be noticed by Aristotle, has finally achieved practical truth. Abstract labour is no Platonic universal for Marx. It is rather the distinctive kind of labour undertaken in a specific social form. At the same time the sociality of labour provides the raw social matter from which a new and distinct mode of production can be constructed. Conceived of in this manner, it is the potential for a new form altogether, and, as such, it is bound to be in tension with the social relations that lead to its constitution. On this argument it is only conceivable that Marx's theory of value can be reconstructed if recourse is made to the key categories that Marx takes from Aristotle. Additionally, the more stress that is laid on the way that bourgeois society can be conceived of as an organic totality, the more that we are faced with the paradox of unity that confronts any unified composite substance. The lesson from that paradox was that the matter and form of a unified substance are necessarily in tension, and that the form must at some point be sloughed off.

Marx's critique of Ricardo combines different philosophical strands, not only the method of critique derived from German idealism but also the critique of all forms of false universals which is part of the Aristotelian inheritance of Marx. Himmelweit and Mohun's way of putting Marx's preferred route for the resolution of Ricardo's dilemma is to see the theory of value as an abstraction. This is a valid way of putting matters if we take, with Marx, the position that the nature of abstract labour is that it is social, and not a predicate of a commodity, but rather of commodity production. As a result it is a product of relationships which, as argued above, Marx held to be dependent on the specific social form involved. Ricardo's error then was that he failed to analyse the specificity of the type of labour involved. It is necessary then, to resolve clearly the status of this sort of error. In that task it is helpful to look at McCarthy's interpretation of the Marx/Ricardo distinction.

⁴² Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 104-5.

Marx and Ricardo: McCarthy's interpretation

In *Marx and the Ancients*, George McCarthy gives an account of the divergence between Marx and Ricardo which differs significantly from that above. He identifies the divergence over the nature of labour that is congealed in the commodity within the capitalist form of social organisation, but he goes on to condemn Ricardo's account of the labour theory of value on the basis that it 'was ontological and metaphysical - not historical.'⁴³ This depiction is intended to act as a token of the superiority of Marx's account over that of Ricardo. It is surprising to see a writer who is familiar with the influence of the Greeks on Marx using metaphysical and ontological to denote what Marx abandoned, rather than what he retained from Aristotle. Marx did not abandon Aristotle's ontology for his meta-ethics, and it is insufficient for commentators to acknowledge the relationship between the two theorists; it is also necessary to reconstruct the connection in an appropriate manner. In line with McCarthy's general interpretation of the Marx/Aristotle relationship in terms of their shared concern with metaethics, he argues that the labour theory of value is the substance of Marx's ethical view. He contrasts the early philosophical works as ethical, and the later historical and structural works as metaethical, and the thrust of his argument is to see Marx in the tradition of Aristotelian ethical thinking, rather than as sharing a metaphysical framework.

In the course of his discussion he makes some over-extended claims about the nature of Marx's critique of capitalism. Whilst arguing, rightly in my view, that the substance of the critique of capitalism remains the same across both the early works and the works around the *Capital* project, he maintains that the problem with the economics of the nineteenth century is that 'everything is reduced to simplistic models of exchange relations based on formal abstractions from the nature of needs, the commodities produced, and the complex social relations inherent in modern capitalist society; it is capitalism without the Industrial Revolution' and the clear implication of McCarthy's writing is that this is both Marx's point of view and a central plank of Marx's critique of Ricardo as well. He goes on to condemn:

Economic abstractionism [which] fails to consider the following: (1) the nature of work; (2) the structure of work organisations; (3) the power and authority relations of the workplace (4) the class structure of society (5) the role of the state in maintaining a system of exchange value and production based on profits and wage labour; and (6) the importance of land

⁴³ McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients* p. 214.

appropriation, exploitation, wars and imperialism for overcoming its internal contradictions (counteracting influences).⁴⁴

But the account provided of the labour theory of value in *Capital* also commits all these crimes; it is abstract, simplified, and fails to consider items (1) to (6) above, (although it clearly has implications for all of them). Marx begins with the analysis of the commodity, comprising both use-value and exchange value; not with the set of complex social relations that go to make up nineteenth century capitalism. This is perhaps unsurprising in view of the fact that *Capital* is only part of a much larger, and unfinished work. It clearly contains abstractions and simplifications. The infantile abstractions of the vulgar economists are condemned not because they are abstractions or because they are simple but because they are inadequate at representing the reality of commodity production: they are the *wrong* abstractions., Such problematic abstractions include, for example, abstractions of false universals, or the *wrong* simplifications, for example, non-contradictory simplifications of the superficial appearances of entities. Because of this they fail to represent things as they really are; they are thus ontologically inadequate.

The core issue dividing Marx and Ricardo, let us remind ourselves, is that Ricardo failed to investigate the nature of the labour that creates or manifests itself in exchange value.⁴⁵ What kind of error is this? Obviously in a sense it is an epistemological error, of failing to analyse an entity deeply enough. But this sort of epistemological error only makes sense as an error, if there is a further, deeper, more fundamental way of analysing the entity at hand. Is there another way of looking at the labour contained in a commodity? Certainly Marx takes it that there is such a view; we can see it as abstract labour; the particular form of labour under capitalism. This question is concerned with the particular being of labour under capitalism; it is an ontological question. What McCarthy gets wrong is shown by his counterposition of an ontological approach to labour, which he says is taken by Ricardo, and a historical and structural approach, which he says is taken by Marx. Implicitly, this rejects the possibility of a historical ontology; the sort of ontology that Aristotle has, that is driven by the need to explain change as well as persistence. But it is just such an ontological perspective, particularly of the same matter being enformed in different ways, that Marx gets from Aristotle. Thus Ricardo's error lies in not having a historical sense of the changing nature of labour in different historical epochs certainly, but his error is not that he has a ontological and metaphysical theory of value, or if he does and it is, then Marx

⁴⁴ McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients* p. 219.

⁴⁵ This is precisely how Marx puts it in *Theories of Surplus Value* volume Three p. 164

commits the same error.

Such an objection to Marx is untenable because Aristotle's ontology is fundamentally what Marx inherits, rather than his morals. There are at least two reasons for this; first, that when Marx uses material from the *Nicomachean Ethics*, it is the discussion of exchange that he employs, rather than the more broad discussion of the good life for man, and secondly because, in line with the discussion from Nielsen above, the moral perspective of Marx comes a poor second to his analysis of the potential for the development of capitalism as a social organism.

CHAPTER SIX
THE DEMANDS OF MARX'S CRITIQUE

'Labour is the living, form giving fire; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living time' ¹

Introduction

At this point it will be worthwhile to recapitulate some of the preceding work, since the first sections of this thesis come from differing theoretical directions. In Chapter One I present an essentially negative argument for a return to study of Marx's metaphysics, by showing that an absence of such study has problematic politico-theoretical consequences. To move away from Marxist positions via the neglect of certain aspects of the theoretical framework attached to Marxism is discreditable, since it is the overcoming of positions that should lead to a rethinking of overall theoretical commitments, not just their overlooking. I also indicate, as an account of intellectual history, the wide knowledge and understanding that Marx had of the ancient Greek world. Nevertheless I make it clear that it is the substantive, rather than the political or historical issues which are the bedrock for an Aristotelian redrawing of Marx's most significant analyses.

In the third chapter, I move from the history of ideas in order to give an account of those considerations drawn from Aristotelian metaphysics which have some purchase on social theory. This includes considerations of substance, change, laws, and natural kinds. There is an overlap of this discussion not only with themes in Marx but also with some of the hardy perennials of social theory and with contemporary analytical philosophy. Nevertheless the ultimate justification for such discussion is still to come, couched in terms of the purchase such a framework gives us on Marx's account of society.

The fifth chapter moves away from Aristotle and on to Marx. In it I give an account of Marx's opposition to the conclusions, method, assumptions and, ultimately, ontology of classical political economy. Although this account can stand alone, it will emerge strengthened from the following discussion.

This negative side of Marx's work has a corresponding positive side which is less well known and less clear in Marx's work. After working through his destructive critique of the canons of classical political economy, Marx needs an Archimedean point from which to move the world. He works for a starting point for theoretical

¹ Marx, *Grundrisse* (Harmondsworth, 1973) translated with a forward by M. Nicolaus, p. 361.

exposition which can overcome the critical failings which vitiate the project of political economy. In the course of this, both interpretative issues surrounding the status of different sections of Marx's corpus and philosophical issues revolving around the nature of the individual/universal and abstract/concrete divide are raised, in the introduction to the *Grundrisse*. They focus on the critique of false universals, drawn from Aristotle's opposition to this key element of Platonism.

In the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, the foundation of Marx's social ontology is located in the discussion of production in general. This essential mediating activity between the human species and nature gives the ontologically basic triple which can be reconceived as social matter (*hyle*). This provides the ontological basis for a wider understanding of the nature of social reality than can be achieved by the vulgar or the classical political economists. I then outline a key component of Marx's social ontology that is necessary to assert the existence of a theory of decay in Marx. This is, analogous to form, the subsumption of production under a dominant relation or category. In the standard case, of bourgeois society, Marx outlines the formal, and then the real subsumption of labour under capital. This is the first, *coming to be*, instance of the relation between form and matter in the social world.

The scope of social ontology

'the actual nature of the particular things that serve as paradigms'² This is the phrase the Putnam contrasts to the empiricist account of the ontology of kinds. in the social world, employing such a perspective makes it possible to point to a radical dislocation between an empiricist method of enquiry and the nature of what is to be analysed. But the ontology which operates as a critique of classical political economy is a social one. The first question that arises is, what then, is meant by social ontology? After outlining an answer to this, it is possible to proceed to the ontology that Marx himself uses and presupposes, and, as a distinct task, we can try to justify that ontology itself.

For Arthur, social ontology refers to: 'That set of fundamental categories through which the character of the social sphere is delimited, and the general framework for theory construction established'³ Such a formula indicates that categorical inadequacy is an ontological fault and subtends my claim that the categorial limits of the political economists signifies inadequacies that are ontological in status. Gould, whose vague 'metaphysical theory of the nature of social reality' does not help very much, glosses this with two meanings: 'the study of the nature of social

² Putnam, H., 'Meaning and Reference' in Schwartz, S. (ed.) *Naming, Necessity and Natural Kinds* p. 132.

³ Arthur, *Dialectics of Labour* p. 153.

reality [and as such] a branch of general ontology.' and 'ontology socialised - a study of reality that reflects on the social roots of the conceptions of this reality'⁴ It seems clear that the second meaning here is parasitic on the first, though in the critique of classical and vulgar political economy it is the second that dominates. Marx not only aims to uncover the failings in the ontology of the political economists, but also to explain these failings by reflecting on the social and political roots, such as the consolidation of bourgeois power by 1830, which ushered in vulgar economics. It is, I think, important to emphasise that Marx's social ontology must face similar standards as any discrete metaphysical theory. Marx did not propose, and Marxist thought is not, some entity hermetically sealed off from the intellectual standards applicable in other areas of thought. Opposition to such a conception of 'Marxism versus bourgeois philosophy' entails insisting that there are no general categorical boundaries between social and general ontology.

Some scholars have questioned the worth of looking for something called an ontology in Marx.⁵ Whether Marx sketched such a framework or not (and I will show that he did, particularly in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*), all social theorists have implicit some idea of basic posits - some conception of what sort of things exist. It is, however, necessary to explain the failure of Marx to produce a codified, formulaic document. Meikle has suggested that the essentialist and dialectical categories of Marx were taken for granted in his time.⁶ The metaphysical categories that a theorist uses to underpin his understanding of the world are the elements of theory most likely to be 'silent' and inexplicit within the work, because they are the elements that will appear most obvious. Quine points out this feature of ontology, suggesting that:

characteristic of metaphysics, of at least of that part of metaphysics called ontology [is that] one who regards a statement on this subject as true at all must regard it as trivially true. One's ontology is basic to the conceptual scheme by which he interprets all experiences, even the most commonplace ones. Judged within some particular conceptual scheme - and how else is judgement possible? - an ontological statements goes without saying, standing in need of no separate justification at all.⁷

⁴ Gould, C., *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality*, (Cambridge, Mass., 1978) p. xi.

⁵ see, for example, Cowling, C. M., 'Hegel, Feuerbach, and Marx', unpublished paper to the Political Studies Association, Annual Conference, (1992) p. 21.

⁶ Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, pp. 25-7.

⁷ Quine, W. V. O., *From a Logical Point of View* (Oxford, 1953) p. 10.

It is not necessary to go as far as Quine, nor to share his own parsimonious ontological commitments in order to appreciate that if Marx was to leave unwritten any work at all, the most promising candidate would be a worked out ontology. In fact, of course, he was to leave much more than this undone at the time of his death. Marx also clearly saw the *Theses on Feuerbach* as a settling of accounts with philosophy in general and metaphysics in particular. However, the continual turn to metaphysical discussion, especially in works that never reached publication in his life time, such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, and, much later, the *Introduction to the Grundrisse*, the *Marginal Notes on Adolph Wagner* and the notebooks now known as *Theories of Surplus Value* suggests that the desire to settle accounts once and for all, was not satisfied. More to the point, Marx was simply wrong to think that the end of German idealism had meant the end of considerations of ontology. The task of redrawing Marx's ontology is, as a result, a task largely of reconstructing what is implicit in the later works, centring on the lessons of the critique of classical political economy and its vulgar successor.

To summarise the conclusions of the previous chapter, the various political economists are criticised by Marx in three ways, but the critique implies a fourth level. For Marx, classical political economy is *ahistorical* in that it is not rooted in an account of historical development, *individualist* in that it generalises social phenomena from a supposed explanation of the micro level behaviour of individual capitalists and *idealist* in that it explains, for example, primitive accumulation in terms of idealised natural tendencies such as diligence or laziness. But underlying and explaining these considerations is the *ontological inadequacy* of the political economists and the consequent partiality of their method.

Marx's critique of political economy is the obverse of the labour theory of value, such that an exposition of the value form is latent in the critique. For Marx, the value form is pushed centre stage because of its constitution by a particular form of human productive activity. The distinctiveness of 'the various economic formations of society' lies in 'the form in which this surplus labour is pumped from the immediate producer, the worker.'⁸ In the critique of political economy, too, the central explanatory role of the value form merely reflects the ontological foundations of human social activity, and, *a fortiori*, capitalism as a social formation. Equally, the critique's three elements have their analogues in the concrete social processes and relations that constitute the social whole which brings them into being. The *idealism* of political economy, raising an abstracted individual governed by idealised properties, reflects man's estrangement from

⁸ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 325.

nature, and the replacement of sensuous, historical, mediating activity, by an occlusion of explanandum and explanans so that modelled interactive behaviour is itself 'explained' by models of individuals, or at its most crude, of the Individual. Mill reveals that such an arbitrary starting point is typical of works of political economy:

Geometry presupposes an arbitrary definition of a line, 'that which has length but not breadth.' Just in the same manner does Political Economy presuppose an arbitrary definition of man, as a being who invariably does that by which he may gain the greatest amount of necessaries conveniences and luxuries with the smallest quantity of labour and physical self-denial with which they can be obtained in the existing state of knowledge. It is true that this definition of man is not formally prefixed to any work on Political Economy ... It is proper that what is assumed in every particular case should once for all be brought before the mind in its full extent, by being formally stated as a general maxim.⁹

Marx rejects the idealism contained in this account, characterised as it is by the construction of a false universal; this 'general maxim' of Mill. This rejection is a parallel procedure to the rejection of false Platonic universals in the Aristotelian tradition.

The ahistoricism of the account provided by political economy maps to the alienation of labour under capitalism - whereby labour is increasingly not of a time or place, but of a form and for a purpose, and yet that purpose is dislocated from the human needs of the social whole from which it emerges. Labour is in a profound sense, ahistoric under capital since it is not *for* or *by* any individual in any determinate situation. Aside from its importance to the working out of the labour theory of value, Marx's characterisation of labour under bourgeois social relations as *abstract* is indicative of the nature of alienated labour under such relations. It is abstract for the worker, as well as within the theoretical system. Marx comments that 'labour itself is objectless, is a reality only in the immediate vitality of the worker'¹⁰

The obfuscations of the hidden hand mean that not even the capitalist who has a high degree of control over the labour process knows which segments of labour

⁹ Mill J. S., 'Essay on the Definition of Political Economy; and the Method of Investigation proper to it' (first published in 1836 in J. S. Mill, *Collected Works* volume IV (Toronto and London 1967), p. 326.

¹⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 364.

fulfil which requirements and can provide no reply to questions such as 'will the products of my labour be used?' 'who will use them?' 'when and where will they be used?' and so on. The central dialectic of capital, the contradiction between the use for which a commodity is produced and the social form under which it is produced, means that the substance of that commodity; labour, is labour in a void. Lastly, the individualism of the political economists reflects the self estrangement of man from man, the very real individualism that is reflected in ideological supports of the bourgeois order.

Ontology of social existence

In *Dialectics of Labour: Marx's Relationship to Hegel* C.J. Arthur argues that the category of productive activity is ontologically basic, from a reading of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. I aim to show that it is a more general organising principle in Marx's work and incidentally provides a key to the continuity problem in Marx.¹¹ The central attention paid to productive activity is a consistent theme in Marx not just in the *Manuscripts* but also in the methodological breakthroughs made late in 1857. Moreover it rests on the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter. Marx's productivist view of man is the basis of his historical account of the development of social forms and their concomitant ideological supports. It is traced by Carver, to his critical reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and to the *Paris Manuscripts* where Marx develops the idea that the human individual (the human being as species being) is essentially the *producing* individual:

in creating a world of objects by his practical activity, in his work upon inorganic nature, man proves himself a conscious species being, ie., ad a being that treats the species as its own essential being, or that treats itself as a species being.... It is just in his work upon the objective world therefore, that man really proves himself to be a *species being* ¹²

Social man or, as Marx puts it in the early works, man as a conscious species being, is constituted through activity. Such was Hegel's insight. But what kind of activity? Here Hegel's account is vitiated by his idealism. He recognised the importance of the self production of man, but at the same time his account, in the *Phenomenology*, is one-sided, according to Marx:

¹¹ For an outline of the problems involved, see Cowling, C. M., 'The Case for Two Marxes Restated' in Cowling, C. M., and Wilde, L. (eds.), *Approaches to Marx* (Milton Keynes, 1989) pp. 15-32. who argues that there is a distinction between a theory of alienation in the early works and a theory of the mode of production in the mature works.

¹² Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts' in *CW* 3 pp. 276-7.

The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phänomenologie...* is thus first that Hegel conceives the self creation of man as a process... [but] The only labour which Hegel knows and recognises is *abstractly mental* labour¹³

The extension of Hegel's view, to cover the many sided nature of labour. becomes focussed in the category of general production in the *Introduction to the Grundrisse*. Here Marx is at his most specific on the nature of social reality, in a passage worth repeating at length. The translation here draws on both the Nicolaus version and Carver's in *Texts on Method*;

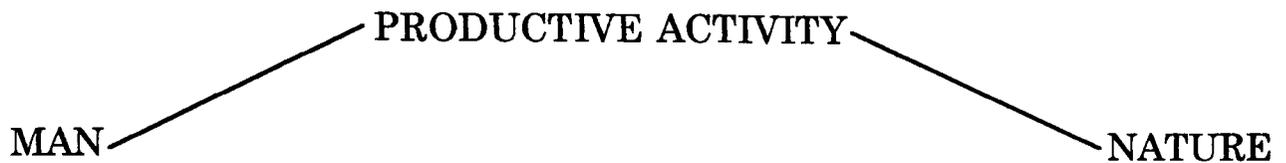
Whenever we speak of production then, what is meant is always production at a definite stage of social development - production by social individuals (*gesellschaftlicher Individuen*). It might seem, therefore that in order to talk about production [generally] at all we must either pursue the process of historic development through its different phases, or declare beforehand that we are dealing with a determinate epoch such as e.g. modern bourgeois production which is indeed our particular theme. However, all epochs of production have certain common distinguishing marks, common determinations. Production in general is an abstraction but a rational abstraction insofar as it really brings out and fixes the common element (*gemeinsame*) and thus saves us repetition. Still, this general [universal] category, this common element sifted out by comparison, is itself segmented many times over and splits into different determinations. Some determinations belong to all epochs, some to only a few. [Some] determinations will be shared by the most modern epoch and the most ancient. No production will be thinkable without them; however, even though the most developed languages have laws and characteristics in common with the least developed, nevertheless, just those things which determine their development, i.e. the elements which are not general and common, must be separated out from the determinations valid for production as such, [applicable to production generally] so that in their unity, - which arises already from the identity of the subject, humanity (*Subjekt, die Menschheit*) and of the object, nature (*Objekt, die Natur*) - their essential difference is not forgotten. The whole profundity of those modern economists who demonstrate the eternity and harmoniousness of the existing relations lies in this forgetting.¹⁴

¹³ Marx, 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844' in CW 3 pp. 332-3.

¹⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse* Nicolaus p. 85, Dietz Verlag p. 7

The overall contrast in this passage is between the general elements and the determinate elements of a social entity. The passage provides considerable support for and explication of the claim about Marx's ontology put forward by Arthur in *Dialectics of Labour*. It is not just true that a reading of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* reveals the fundamental existing matrix for Marx as the mediation of the humanity-nature couple by productive activity. The Grundrisse Introduction is also premised on such a reading.

Following the account in *Grundrisse*, Marx's view of human society at its most bare is as outlined in Arthur's first matrix:



Marx explicitly refers to the two poles of this ontology as the *subject* and *object* and goes on to speak of production itself as a subject under certain circumstances, though it is more characteristic to see the translation of the critical term *bestimmungen* as mediation or determination. This matrix consists of the social matter (*hyle*) which is always enformed by a distinct set of social relations. It is fundamental to Marx's concept of social existence. Considered as a mediation between two poles, the matrix also provides one of the building blocks of Marx's method. Meszaros indicates the unique value of this 'monistic materialism':

Only in Marx's monistic materialism can we find a coherent comprehension of 'objective totality' as 'sensuous reality' and a correspondingly valid differentiation between subject and object, thanks to his concept of mediation as ontologically fundamental productive activity, and thanks to his grasp of the specific, second order mediations through which the ontological foundation of human existence is alienated from man in the capitalist order of society.¹⁵

But despite all this, Marx is clearly aware of the problems of being ahistorical himself and the continual need to relate production in general; what Carver somewhat confusingly calls 'production as a logical universal' to its specific instantiations. Marx fights against systematically founding his system on a logical universal¹⁶ both because of his antipathy to the ahistoricism of the

¹⁵ Meszaros, I., *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London, 1970) p. 87

¹⁶ For an expansive, and perhaps over extended account of Marx's opposition to false universals, see McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, p. 223.

account of the political economists and his wider wish to avoid 'a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical' ¹⁷

It is perhaps ironic that Marx is reluctant to take this step of generating a general historico-philosophical theory' since such a task has been meat and drink to many of his interpreters.¹⁸ But Marx is more cautious. Therefore he emphasises his own (Aristotelian) consideration, that the general determinations need to be worked out in their relationship to the specific forms of society. Nevertheless, he points out that production has more to it, as a category, than simply a particular:

The relation of the general characteristics of production at a given stage of social development to the particular forms of production is to be developed elsewhere (later). Lastly, production also is not only a particular production. Rather it is always a certain social body, a social subject, which is active in a greater or sparser totality of branches of production. ¹⁹

The 'certain social subject' here refers to what Marx later explicates as the dominant or determinate form of production. This is active not in every branch of production but only in the essential core. Thus a scientific presentation has to identify this core, and to theorise the type of production within it. In the analysis of specific social forms, human productive activity appears too general a notion to carry the explanatory weight with which it has been invested. Nonetheless, Marx does continually return to this theme, emphasising that production in general is an expression of the immanent nature of humanity: not feudal man, or bourgeois man, but humanity as a whole. In this vein he speaks of the 'production process in general, such as is common to all social conditions, that is, without historic character, *human* if you like.'²⁰

The Introduction to the *Grundrisse* provides ample evidence of Aristotelian hylomorphism in Marx's social ontology, and this theoretical perspective informs his critique of political economy. But this analysis raises a question: 'Does the *Grundrisse* provide a reliable guide to Marx's conception of social ontology?'

¹⁷ Marx to the editorial board of *Otechestvenniye Zapiski* November 1877 in *Selected Correspondence*, p. 294.

¹⁸ The obvious example of this is Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, though Cohen himself is aware of this caution in Marx.

¹⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 86.

²⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 320.

The Status of the Introduction to the Grundrisse

If substantial explanatory weight is to be placed on the Introduction to the Grundrisse in the reconstruction of Marx's social ontology, then we need to secure the reliability of this text. Certain problems arise here, firstly some critics most notably Nicolaus in his foreword to the *Grundrisse*, have suggested that the introduction is 'a false start'... idealist and inferior 'as dialectics'²¹ to the starting point of the *Critique of Political Economy* and *Capital 1* which both begin with the commodity. More importantly, perhaps, Marx himself reveals in the *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy*:

A general introduction, which I had drafted, is omitted, since on further reflection it seemed to me confusing to anticipate results which still have to be substantiated, and the reader who really wishes to follow me will have to decide to advance from the particular to the general.²²

It is worth noting that Marx's rethink here tends to elevate the 1859 Preface, foregrounding the famous formulae of historical materialism which have been so widely interpreted to the exclusion of much else in the canon. But such elevation of the aphoristic and metaphorical Preface of 1859 is not warranted. Marx's reasons for omitting the introduction are not theoretical but presentational and political.

It is well known that Marx in the Postface to the Second German Edition of *Capital* distinguishes between the method of presentation and the method of enquiry:

the latter has to appropriate the material in detail, to analyse its different forms of development and to track down their inner connections. only after this work has been done can the real movement be appropriately presented.²³

It is for presentational reasons rather than reasons to do with the method of enquiry that Marx discards the 1857 *Grundrisse* introduction and uses the 1859 version instead. He is simply afraid of confusing his readers by presenting a too general and abstract account. But for those who wish to penetrate the detailed method of enquiry, to appreciate the work transparently and not in its appearance as an 'a priori construction'²⁴ then the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* is likely to be

²¹ Nicolaus in Marx, *Grundrisse* (foreword) p. 38.

²² Marx, *Preface to the Critique of Political Economy* (London, 1970) p. 19.

²³ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 102.

²⁴ Marx, *Capital 1*, p. 102.

more help. Marx does write, after all, that investigation of

determinant, abstract general relations is the obviously scientifically correct method. The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, not as a point of departure, though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation and conception... along the second [path] the abstract determinations lead towards a reproduction of the concrete by way of thought.²⁵

This justification of using abstract determinations such as production as a starting point and proceeding to less abstract and more concrete determinations is couched in theoretical terms and not in terms of presentation or accessibility.

The second charge that Nicolaus lays in his 'false start' critique of the passages dealing with production in general is that they employ an idealist category. Here Nicolaus is led astray by his focus on the Hegelian influences on Marx's thought to the detriment of the Aristotelian ones. For Aristotle universals exist only when realised in particulars. Marx does write of production as an abstraction, but a rational abstraction (as opposed to the irrational abstractions of bourgeois ideology; Platonic universals such as Man, Freedom, and Justice), and rational because it picks out a really existing common element:

To summarise: there are characteristics which all stages of production have in common, which are established as general ones by the mind; however, the so-called *general conditions* of all production are nothing more but these abstract moments, with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped.²⁶

It is certainly true that starting *Capital* with the commodity form has advantages, since that form comprises the unity of exchange value and use value. But what Marx is using there is a concretisation of the form (production of exchange values, driven and determined by the law of value) which is imposed on biologically necessary, ontologically basic matter, human productive activity or the transformation of nature to satisfy human needs. The commodity, he believes, is the best way of focussing and bringing out the tension between form and matter which he identifies as fundamental in 1857. Exchange value, specific to bourgeois society, reflects its social form, and the imperative of production for profit, Use

²⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 101.

²⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 88.

values as the material outcome of production reflect the matter of society, and are thus outside the immediate concerns of political economy.

In the *Grundrisse* introduction Marx scorns 'text book beginnings' since all they consist of is 'the dialectical balancing of concepts rather than the 'real relations' . But this should not be allowed to overshadow the fact that he has, and has to have, a relatively abstract ontology which though laid out briefly in its most general form, is *investigated* in its specific form: commodity production. Light is shed on these abstractions in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, which *pace* Nicolaus can be trusted to guide us towards an understanding of Marx's ontology and hence his method, and does not represent a false start.

The ontology of Capitalist production

What is not given, in the account of production in general is, of course, the superimposition of the relation of capital onto this process. Marx points out that, just as matter only exists relative to form, so:

all production is appropriation of nature on the part of an individual within and through a specific form of society ²⁷

Under specific social forms, some qualities of human labour are suppressed and others are developed. In particular, Marx isolates the 'magical' property of labour that it resurrects its past products. This is is 'none of the workers business'²⁸ under bourgeois relations, in this social form. And, says Marx plainly, this quality sets up a fundamental antithesis; one of the very few occasions when he uses that term:

*This appropriation, by means of which living labour comes makes instrument and material in the productive process into the body of its soul and thereby resurrects them from the dead, does indeed stand in antithesis to the fact that labour itself is objectless, is a reality only in the immediate vitality of the worker - and that the instrument and material, in capital exist as beings-for-themselves.*²⁹

Marx is concerned, therefore, to contrast the qualities that are expressed in production as such with those which are qualities of the form under which production takes place. Human social labour has an object, and a purpose, but labour under capitalist relations is objectless, labour becomes not something of

²⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 87.

²⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 364.

²⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 364.

itself, but a means to, or 'moment of' capital. This is critical. Production is natural and essential, but the nature of production under capitalism is not; it is estranged and external to the individual human being under the dominant relation. Marx wants to move beyond the abstract determinations, in order to investigate the specific nature of one social organism and highlight the peculiar modifications of social matter when enformed in this way. So while the matrix Humanity - productive activity - nature, of Marx's fundamental ontology has both textual and conceptual support, running from the early works through to the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, he is impatient with the task of 'establishing by the mind' an ontology, and anxious to move on to the specific determinations and forms of production under a specific set of social relations which constitute capitalism. Once the move is made to these specific relations, the most well founded abstract determinations receive their 'full validity'. In this way Marx rehearses the Aristotelian point that such universals only exist when fully instantiated in a particular social form.

the most abstract categories despite their validity - precisely because of their abstractness - for all epochs, are nevertheless, in the specific character of this abstraction, themselves likewise a product of historic relations, and possess their full validity only for and within those relations.³⁰

So the basic matrix needs to be developed since production; the first 'abstraction' Marx deduces for its 'validity for all epochs' does not exist in and of itself but is organised under the category of social relations. At the same time Marx insist on the existence of a dominant relation:

In all forms of society there is one specific kind of production which predominates over the rest, whose relations thus assign rank and influence to the others. ³¹

This is like a 'general illumination which bathes all the other colours and modifies their particularity'; it is for Marx of enormous explanatory power, despite being ontologically parasitic on the primacy of production as such. We should therefore extend the matrix of human social existence to make it more concrete without making it any less general or essential by introducing first the social relations 'for and within which' human productivity occurs, and second noting that, for Marx, there is one dominant social relation. The mediating moment between man and

³⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 105.

³¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, pp. 106-7

nature of productive activity therefore is constituted under the totality of social relations and chief amongst them the dominant relation. Outlining this dominant relation is the task of *Capital*, in which the dominant capital-labour relation is drawn through the development and maturity of a social organism. The ontological basis for this is contained in the *Grundrisse*. By the time *Capital*, comes to be written, Marx has largely moved away from ontology into political economy: the study of the specific social relations of capitalism, and the details of that study are beyond the scope of the present work. Nonetheless, there are specifically ontological problems associated with the category of relations, and in particular with the idea of a dominant relation which 'assign[s] rank and influence to the others.'

Gould's view and associated problems

The issue of the ontological status of social relations is raised by a competing account of Marx's social ontology: that presented by Gould in her work *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality*. Comparison of the account here and that account is therefore a useful task. Gould's initial thesis is that for Marx (and after Aristotle) the 'primary ontological subject is, properly speaking, a social individual' a phrase with which she explicates the notion of 'individuals-in-relation'. On this reading, ontological priority is accorded to concrete individuals whilst 'relations' are included in order to make such individuals comprehensible to the social theorist³². It is, however, the couple individuals-in-relations which constitutes a social substance for Gould rather than the three part matrix humankind - productive activity - nature, albeit always structured by social relations. Gould therefore makes relations, not productive activity, ontologically primary, and eliminates nature as a causal element in social ontology

But this sits uneasily with the remarks of Marx which suggest that activity, specifically productive and creative activity is transhistorically basic. Gould accepts, indeed, foregrounds the ontological nature of labour, but is reluctant to categorise labour as ontologically basic, in the same way and with the same status that individuals-in-relations have. This is a consequence of what Gould specifies as the special nature of Marx's ontology. Unlike traditional ontologies it

³² There is nothing wrong *a priori* with the technique of separating ontological and explanatory priority. My objection to Gould is that there is insufficient meat in her category of relations to perform the task of explanation adequately since it does not explain why production relations should be thought to provide the 'illumination' to all the other social relations. But there is no objection to separating different forms of priority. A key feature of the arguments for some form of methodological individualism is the assumption of a necessary parallelism between what is logically prior, or ontologically prior, and what is the appropriate *explanans*.

has no static content but is constantly changing. Gould is unwilling to concede the existence of a conception of such a fixed human nature in Marx:

Marx goes beyond Hegel and Aristotle in the notion that the individual creates his or her own nature by his or her activity and that this is not a fixed nature or essence but rather one that is itself changing as a result of this activity³³

The most general objection to this is that there is such a fixed nature or essence and it consists in precisely this activity. Whatever it is that human beings do, they do. (This is something like Descartes argument for the essentiality of thinking; whatever it is that I think, I think.) This 'doing' is inseparable from the existence of human life. Another way of putting this is to suggest that for Gould the human - activity relation is the relation between a thing and its properties, rather than a thing and its nature. It is therefore open to the Kripkean objection that an account of properties does not provide a complete or adequate guide to the nature of a thing. On the interpretation above, the relation is more equal, and necessary, akin to the relation between body and *Anima*, in a living being. Neither element is reducible to a contingent property of the other. To extend Marx's rejection of a fixed and static human essence (*pace* Feuerbach) into the claim that nothing but material individuals (explicable only with reference to relations) exists, misses Marx's clear understanding of the omnipresence of human productive activity as the agency which transforms the relations, which in turn explain concrete action. It also incidentally gives unwarranted ground to the methodological individualists without putting up a fight.

On the other hand to include human productive activity, and hence labour as an ontologically fundamental entity, and one which is ontologically prior to relations has consequences in explaining some of the sophisticated distinctions in Marx that Gould brings out later in her work. Most importantly, Gould show that the formal and instrumental equality that exists in the bourgeois exchange relation is paralleled by an exploitative relation of domination in production where living labour is dominated by dead labour, in the form of capital. This feature of bourgeois society, frequently pointed out by Marx, is the main object of his injunction to penetrate from appearance to essence. It has important repercussions for the nature of a future communal system in that it points to the need to organise production on a democratic basis rather than to rest content with a (necessarily temporary) equality of distribution.

³³ Gould, C., *Marx's Social Ontology: Individuality and Community in Marx's Theory of Social Reality* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978).p. 40.

This is the implication of Marx's elucidation of the misleading appearance of the general exchange relations of capitalism. He argues that the apparent equality of exchange under capitalism is an illusory reflection of the capitalist relation underlying it:

in the circulation process in the market place, two equally matched commodity owners confront each other, and that they, like all other commodity owners are distinguishable only by the material content of their goods, by the specific use value of the goods they desire to sell each other or, in other words, the original relation remains intact, but survives only as the illusory reflection of the capitalist relation underlying it.³⁴

The capitalist relation in production therefore is dominant over the apparently equal relation in exchange. There are pointers to the core of Marx's ontology, here stemming from the manner in which he claims that one relation is 'dominant' over another. This is the sort of claim that is bound to generate charges of crude reductionism in many contemporary critics. How is such an ontological step possible? Any explanation of this text needs to explain how it is that different relations can have the contradictory facets which are indicated. There are two relations that Marx speaks of: the first is the pre-capitalist relation of equality of exchange. This is temporally original, ontologically superficial, epistemologically illusory, yet real. The capitalist relation, which is a relation of domination, is temporally limited to the capitalist mode of production, ontologically essential, epistemologically scientific, and also real. But the first relation is now just the shell in which the second relation actually appears.

Resolution of this issue becomes possible if we see the matter of society not just 'kickable' individuals, or those individuals plus 'kickable' things but these two poles as actually related through human productive activity. The form of society consists of the mediated expressions of these ontological 'bricks' and has explanatory primacy over the matter. The identification of those entities and relations whose development gives the line of a particular mode of production, however occurs with reference to this prior understanding of the ontology of social existence and the primacy of productive activity within that.

Thus, what makes the value form into the constitutive element of capitalism *par excellence*, and what makes it the entity whose development governs the existence or nature of that society, is its constitution by human productive activity.

³⁴ Marx, Results of the immediate Process of Production in *Capital 1*, pp. 1062-3

Specifically it is constituted by the form of human productive activity specific to that society: abstract social labour. This is why one relation, in the realm of production is more essential than another relation, in the realm of exchange. It is simply because production itself is more fundamental than exchange. Marx has a hierarchy of relations dependent on their ontological sphere. Thus human productive activity bequeaths the relations governing it their fundamental importance.

Despite her best intentions, in separating out human productive activity as simply a property of concrete human individuals rather than their very nature, Gould gives too much away to those who operate from a different epistemological and ontological perspective. It might seem churlish to criticise Gould's underestimation of the importance of labour in Marx's social ontology, since, in noting the dominant role of human productive activity in Marx's schema she outlines a labour theory of cause which, she suggests, is implicit in comments in the *Grundrisse*. It is important to state what may be at stake here. If such a theory succeeds it appears to add weight to the traditional Marxist argument that it is labour that provides the substance to which exchangeable commodities are commensurable. I would want to sustain the traditional argument in the realm of political economy, but the labour theory of cause seems to me to be flawed. In particular it seems as if Gould, under pressure from the widespread attacks on the labour theory of value, restrains Marx's ontology in her attempt to defend it. This entails making labour not just the value producing element but also the only causal element in 'the working up of a world of objects.'

Gould on the 'Labour theory of Cause'

In her discussion of the labour theory of cause Gould claims that:

on Marx's view only human agency, or what Marx calls labour is properly regarded as causal. The objective conditions for action are precisely that, namely conditions and not causes. Furthermore, they become conditions for labouring activity only insofar as agents have to take them into account in order to realise their purposes.³⁵

This is a difficult position to sustain. If it is Marx's, then so much the worse for Marx. But I hope to show that it is not and that some of Marx's insights into the nature of the social world rely on the sort of considerations I will outline.

Let us begin with the distinction Gould draws between causes and conditions. On

³⁵ Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology*, p. 81.

this account, human labour is the unique causal agency and the outside world simply provides the conditions under which events take place. There are two counter examples to this. First it implies that before human history began, nothing took place. It certainly may be a Marxist contention that nothing interesting happened until *Homo erectus* stood erect, though even this is disputable. It may also be the case that it required a knowing agent to observe the external world in order to grant it any significance and this is implied by the mediation of the man-nature relation by human activity. But to suggest that the unknowable is also nonexistent seems to be an unwarranted conflation of ontology and epistemology.

The second problem with Gould's account of the nature of social reality lies in the exclusion of the non human world from the basic entities of social reality. Perhaps the most objective set of conditions, which human technology looks unlikely ever to bring under its control is the set of meteorological conditions. Yet Gould seems to be committed to saying that, for example, thunderstorms cannot 'properly (be) regarded as causal', and that statements such as 'the rain caused the landslide', are somehow improper. But such a causal statement seems to have the same if not more force as the oft repeated statement of electoral folklore that 'the rain caused the landslide victory'. Intuitively, the first case seems a straightforward explanation specifying in sufficient detail the mechanism underlying a particular event. In the second and more social case, the folklore is usually corroborated by a description of the coinciding class bias of both voting habits and car ownership so that parties 'of the bourgeoisie' are supposed to do better in elections when it rains. Thus as a condition that is taken into account by human agents, the rain enters into a causal explanation, as a condition. That sort of explanation appears to need just such corroboration because, in this instance, the intervention of the non-human world appears as a condition and not as a cause. But the overall adequacy of the explanation does not appear to be problematic in the first case. It is difficult to avoid concluding that Gould has detected a distinction without a difference, between conditions and causes.

What Gould seems to be pursuing is an argument in which non-human causal chains only impinge on human interaction when they interact with those actions, and then they can be characterised as 'objective conditions' rather than parts of causal chains. These objective conditions, for Gould are 'conditions for labouring activity only insofar as agents have to take them into account in order to realise their purposes.' It may be that there is a continuum from causing X to being an objective condition for X, depending on what description we take of X. But Gould's schema rules out in advance the possibility that any thing other than human

agency can be causal. Further more, the suggestion that the contribution of the non human world, whether it be causal or conditional is dependent on 'agents hav[ing] to take them into account' seems perilously close to the Humean insistence that necessity only exists in the mind, and not in objects. On a realist assumption of the objective existence of modalities of causality and necessity, it is clearly problematic.

Furthermore, it is certainly Marx's view, at least early on, that nature is a part of human activity:

Just as plants, animals, stone, air light etc constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, party as objects of art - his spiritual inorganic nature, spiritual nourishment which he must first prepare to make palatable and digestible - so also in the realm of practice they constitute a part of life and human activity. The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his inorganic body³⁶

Interpreters of Marx may have had a technocratic and domineering attitude to nature, and may be susceptible to a critique influenced by environmentalism. But it is not clear that Marx is open to the same attack. This is especially the case if we adopt a conception of humanity interacting productively with nature as argued above.

The formal and real subsumption of labour under capital

Marx gives a clear account of the imposition of specific social relations on the social matrix outlined above. In a paper which makes use of recently released original source material from MEGA, White notes the importance of the Schellingian notion of *subsumption* in the transition from the earliest work in Marx's critique of political economy to *Capital* itself. This refers to;

the progressive reconstruction of all previously existing society and economic forms on the capitalist model, or what Marx termed a form 'adequate' to Capital. The Hegelian term implied that as it circulated capital would progressively become more rational by eliminating any element which was at odds with its own essence or nature. Marx's implication was that in this respect capital would act like a Hegelian Concept.³⁷

³⁶ Marx, 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844' CW 3 p. 275.

³⁷ White J., 'Marx: From The Critique Of Political Economy to *Capital*', *Studies in Marxism* 1 (1994), p. 91.

But, White argues, the Hegelian parallel is not exact because while the Hegelian concept becomes adequate to itself, Marx wants a term to describe the process wherein the concept makes something else adequate to itself. Consequently, it is perhaps easier to encapsulate this process as the progressive and dynamic enforming of alien matter. For Marx, it was not only economic phenomena that were subsumed under Capital but 'many things are subsumed under capital which do not seem to belong to it conceptually' That is, some things relatively remote from capital and neither 'posited by it' or 'presupposed by it', could be subsumed under it.³⁸ The process of subsumption of matter under form is also characteristic of Feudalism, according to an untranslated fragment of the notebooks for *Capital* since 'even relations which are very remote from the essence of feudalism take on a feudal expression'³⁹

The subsumption of labour under capital works both intensively and extensively. It extends by overcoming non-capitalist communities and transferring their members into proletarians and capitalists. It changes the meaning of the productive process, intensively, by bring more and more spheres of productive activity under the sway of capital. In the '*Results of the immediate process of production*', the only surviving fully translated part of the third draft of the critique of political economy which Marx began in 1863, he distinguishes between the formal and real subsumption of labour under capital. The first, formal step is defined as 'the takeover by capital of a mode of labour developed before the emergence of capitalist relations.'⁴⁰ Capital takes over the feudal labour process, although:

this change does not in itself imply a fundamental change in the real nature of the labour process, the actual process of production. On the contrary, the fact is that capital subsumes the labour process as it finds it, that is to say, it takes over an existing labour process, developed by different and more archaic modes of production.⁴¹

The formal subsumption has both similarities and differences to the real subsumption of labour under capital. The relative and formal freedom of capitalist social relations *vis a vis* feudal relations is a feature of both the formal and the real subsumption of labour: 'a mode of compulsion not based on personal relations of domination and dependency, but simply on differing economic functions - this is

³⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 513.

³⁹ MEGA II/3.6., p. 2180, cited in White Glasgow 1994

⁴⁰ 'Results of the immediate Process of Production' in *Capital 1*, p.1021.

⁴¹ 'Results of the immediate Process of Production' in *Capital 1*, p.1021.

common to both.' 42

But there is a crucial difference, in that under the formal subsumption of labour under capital the only method of increasing the production of surplus value is by increasing absolute, rather than relative surplus value, by lengthening the working day. The power of capital is thus of restricted penetration since it has not yet reached the heart of the social entity - the productive process. In contrast the real subsumption of labour under capital stems from large scale industry and a transformation of the labour process permits the widespread pursuit of relative surplus value:

The real subsumption of labour under capital is developed in all the forms evolved by relative as opposed to absolute surplus value.⁴³

As the dominant capitalist relation finds fertile soil for its development in the productive process, so the productive process itself subtends the dominant social relation:

On the one hand, capitalist production now establishes itself as a mode of production *sui generis* and brings into being a new mode of material production. On the other hand the latter itself forms the basis to the development of capitalist relations whose adequate form, therefore, presupposes a definite stage in the evolution of the productive forces of labour⁴⁴

It is the harmoniousness of the relation between the productive process on the one hand and the form under which it takes place on the other, which generates the development of a specifically capitalist mode of production. Equally, it is the potential contradiction between these two; the organs and the skeletal structure of the capitalist organism, which poses problems for the entity, in Marx's theory. For the subsumption of labour under capital has its opposite: the process by which capital loses its grip, and the spheres of activity which it had dominated become increasingly 'other' to it. This is parallel to the process of decay of the capitalist social organism.

⁴² 'Results of the immediate Process of Production' in *Capital 1*, p. 1021.

⁴³ 'Results of the immediate Process of Production' in *Capital 1*, p. 1021

⁴⁴ 'Results of the immediate Process of Production' in *Capital 1*, p. 1035.

CHAPTER SEVEN
MARXISM AND DECAY

Introduction

In his critique of the classical political economists, Marx is at pains to show that much of their account is derived from a belief in natural economic laws, such as, in the case of Ricardo, the natural law of diminishing returns and the Malthusian population principle. The driving assumption behind such views is that the social form of capitalism is universal and permanent, since the properties of capitalist society are taken to be the properties of all societies. Against the classical school, Marx takes it to be a social organism with a finite (but not necessarily specifiable) life span. When he argues in such a manner, Marx restates ancient beliefs about the transitory nature of existence and the eternal nature of change. In particular, there are strong parallels between Marx's account of the decline and eventual fall of capitalism, and the Aristotelian message that all sublunary entities come to be and pass away. These parallels are often only implicit, but sometimes, and especially in the *Grundrisse*, they are manifest and explicit. Even when only implicit, they are sufficiently striking to allow us to recognise that Marx's account of the crisis ridden and ultimately doomed perspective for capitalism, overlooked by his protagonists, is but a variant of the Aristotelian theory of passing away or *phthorá*. These parallels will form the basis of this chapter, which makes the case that Marx employs ontological categories particularly suited to explaining the decay of social forms.

Because it is rooted in his ontology, the notion of decay in his work is not simply a useful analogy with the organic world or, as in Elster's characterisation of his analysis of crisis, a 'visionary image of the decline and fall of the capitalist mode of production'¹ but an exposition of his Aristotelian social ontology. Understanding Marx's thinking in this manner also undermines Elster's claim that Marx was so certain of the downfall of capitalism and its replacement that he did not provide satisfactory arguments for it: 'If his theory fails to persuade us, it is no doubt because he himself was so persuaded of the necessity of communism that he did not feel an argument was needed.'² So Marx's account is the product of his mind set, rather than of a rigorous argument. This is an overly harsh verdict on Marx's actual practice, but, even if it was accurate, we might want to know what it was that provides Marx with this persuasive mind set, and whether it is indeed a psychological surrogate for an argument. As we have already seen, what counts as a persuasive argument is not ontology independent, since criteria of plausibility depend on what questions are posed, and the posing of questions is bound up with

¹ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 156.

² Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 513.

ontological commitments. If the critique that Marx provides of the classical political economists is, from one angle, a clash of two incompatible assumptions: the permanence of capitalism on the one hand and the certainty of its replacement on the other, then it is worth investigating just what ontological commitments are bound up in such opposing views. The grounding of Marx's assumption was his Aristotelian understanding of the principle that every sublunary being is necessarily destined to pass away. This perspective can be assessed, but only if we follow the line of thought that leads to it.

Aristotle on *phthorá*

In Classical Greek philosophy, *phthorá* is the end of the process of *kinesis*,³ and so it is the correlative of *genesis*; coming to be. In the case of the Parmenidean *on* (the one) or the Platonic *eide* (forms), we are dealing with conceptions of beings that have no *kinesis*. As a result, neither in the case of Parmenidean *on* nor for the Platonic *eide* can there be either *genesis* nor *phthorá*. But Aristotle was unsympathetic to both the Parmenidean position and to Plato's *eide* and so, against them, he provides an account of decay, or *phthorá* as the counterpart of *genesis*.⁴ This account occurs in many of his works, most obviously in *On Generation and Decay* but also in the biological treatises and in the *Meteorology*.

Aristotle begins *On Generation and Decay* by distinguishing his position from two earlier views of *genesis* and *phthorá*, that of the Monists, in particular Parmenides, and that of the Atomists, in particular Democritus. The Monists, hold that there is only the *on* (the one) and that this suffers no quantitative change. This is because that which is, cannot not be, and that which is not, cannot be (and cannot be known). They are therefore impelled to reduce *genesis* and *phthorá* to qualitative change in a single substance.⁵

The Atomists, hold a variant of the principle of the Pluralists, that *genesis* and *phthorá* are different from changes of quality, and explain them by the association

³ *kinesis* is normally translated as motion, movement, or change. Parmenides attacked all forms of change because he denied the possibility of the void, and so seems to deprive body of a place into which to move.

⁴ There is some question over the best translation of *phthorá*; whether it should be rendered as passing-away, corruption or decay. The last two have more of the organic connotation often associated with *phthorá*, but the first better captures the specifically philosophical meaning of substantial change into non-being. However, it is odd to translate nominal words in Greek by verbal forms since Greek lack the multiplicity of nominal verbs that English possesses. Therefore it seems appropriate to try to mimic the Greek form when nominals are used. For further comments see Williams, C. J. F., *Aristotle's De Generatione and Corruptione* (Oxford, 1982), p. ix-x: 'Greek no more than English has a single word to express the concept *ceasing to be*. It is its possession of a single word, (i.e. *genesis*, J.P.) which English lacks, for *coming to be* which creates philosophical problems.' (p. x).

⁵ Aristotle, *On Generation and Decay*, 1. 1.

and segregation of atoms.⁶ In Aristotle's theory, *genesis* and *phthorá* are forms of substantial change; coming to be, and passing away *simpliciter*, rather than coming to be something, and so they are distinguished from accidental change, against Parmenides. But, against Democritus, they are also distinguished from incremental changes through aggregation and segregation:

Nevertheless, coming to be *simpliciter* ie. absolutely, is not defined by aggregation and segregation as some say, nor is change in what is continuous the same as alteration ... coming to be and ceasing to be *simpliciter*, occur, not in virtue of aggregation but when something changes from this whole to that whole.⁷

However, this holist account of *genesis* and *phthorá* is more than a rehash of the distinction between substantial and accidental change, since it is specifically designed to provide an account of the way in which entities decay, rather than merely fitting them into philosophical categories. It is an exposition of the internal decay of an entity, which comes into play when the cause of maintenance in an entity is weak or absent. Just what this cause of maintenance in an entity is, will differ along the same cleavage as the important Aristotelian distinction between organisms and artifacts. The line demarcating artifacts and organisms is between those entities whose source of maintenance is internal, and those whose source is external. Whilst a chair is put together by a carpenter, using tools and glue, living organisms are kept whole from an internal source, as Aristotle pointed out in his disagreement with Empedocles in *On the Soul*. Empedocles suggested that growth in plants was to be explained by two opposite natural tendencies; the roots travelled downwards because of the natural tendency of earth to travel downward and the upward branching was caused by the similar natural tendency of fire to move upwards. Why, asks Aristotle is the plant not ripped apart by these two opposing tendencies?:

We must ask what is the force that holds together the earth and the fire which tend to travel in contrary directions; if there is no counteracting force, they will be torn asunder; if there is, this must be the soul and the cause of nutrition and growth.⁸

The soul, on this account, is the unifying and cohesive element that enables the organism to persist over time. But the presence in natural entities of an internal cause of maintenance does not mean that such entities will last for ever. On the

⁶ Aristotle, *On Generation and Decay* 1. 2.

⁷ Aristotle, *On Generation and Decay* 317a 18.

⁸ Aristotle, *On the Soul* 415b 23 - 416a 9.

contrary, all natural bodies are finite and short lived:

for there is an order controlling all things and every time i.e. every life is measured by a period. Not all of them, however are measured by the same period but some by a smaller and others by a larger one; for to some of them the period which is their measure is a year, while to some it is longer and to others shorter.⁹

When their time is up, these natural things cease to be, in one of two ways. They can be destroyed by an external agent, or they can pass away through the breakdown of the internal mechanism that secures their persistence. The first sort of passing away, is less intrinsically interesting than the second since it is not in keeping with the essential nature of the organism. In fact, the violent destruction of an organism is sometimes argued to be an archetype of accidental change and is thus, on an Aristotelian reading, inexplicable, since no knowledge is possible of what takes place by accident. Instead, knowledge is confined to what happens always or for the most part. More interesting is the manner of the ceasing to be of all natural things that do not come to a violent end. This is what Aristotle means by *phthorá*. It is the non-accidental way in which an entity changes ‘from this whole to that whole’:

Putrescence is the end of all these things, that is of all natural objects, except such as are destroyed by violence: you can burn, for instance, flesh bone, or anything else but the natural course of their destruction ends in putrefaction. Hence things that putrefy begin by being moist and end by being dry. For the moist and the dry were their matter and the operation of the active qualities caused the dry to be determined by the moist.¹⁰

But there is a paradox involved in this account, as Clark points out;¹¹ although decay is part of the natural scheme of things, it is not, in itself, a natural phenomenon; ‘all weakness in animals, such as old age and decay is unnatural.’¹² On one hand, Aristotle sees the endless cycle of generation and decay as natural, on the other hand, he sees the growth into its highest form as the natural development of an organism, and *phthorá*, as a denial of this growth, as unnatural. The paradox can be resolved by looking at two senses of ‘natural’. First, the sense in which what is natural, is what is an inevitable part of the natural world, and

⁹ Aristotle, *On Generation and Decay* 336b 11f., see also *Metaphysics* XIV 1093a 4ff., *On the Heavens* 279a 23ff., and *Generation of Animals* 777b 16ff.

¹⁰ Aristotle, *Meteorology* 379a 5.

¹¹ Clark, S. L. R., *Aristotle's Man* (Oxford, 1975) p. 165.

¹² Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 288b 15f.

second, the sense that takes the most natural form of the organism in question to be its mature form, or its best form; the most adequate form for fulfilling its *telos*. In this sense, a healthy, fit, adult is the most natural form of human being, rather than a corpse, since that is no form of the organism at all. A corpse is, in fact, not a man since it lacks the integrating life provided by the soul. Aristotle uses this second sense when he argues against Democritus' atomism, in the *Parts of Animals*:

Does then, configuration and colour constitute the essence of the various animals and of their several parts? For if so, what Democritus says will be correct. For such appears to be his notion. At any rate he says that it is evident to everyone what form it is that makes the man, seeing that he is recognisable by his shape and colour. And yet a dead body has exactly the same configuration as a living one; but for all that is not a man.¹³

One way of clearing the paradox is to argue that decay is natural with respect to the matter *kata ten hulen*, but unnatural with regard to the form *kata to eidos*,¹⁴ and this solution to the question over the naturalness of *phthorá* also gives us clues as to what sort of process Aristotle thinks it is. Since all sensible entities are considered by Aristotle to be hylomorphic; composed of both matter and form, and *phthorá* is a process that occurs internally; within entities, it makes sense to suggest that it is likely to involve this very contrast between matter and form. And this is, indeed, what Aristotle suggests. For him, *phthorá* is the process by which matter exerts itself over, and triumphs over the form. So, when the determining form of an entity fails to exert itself over the determined matter, its natural life span is coming to an end, so that 'Destruction supervenes when the determined gets the better of the determining by the help of the environment.'¹⁵

The normal direction of determination is one in which form determines matter. Conceptually, this notion is fairly straight forward, by analogy with the imposition of a form over formless matter by some external agent; as, for instance, when a sculptor turns stone into a statue. In that case, the form of the statue determines which material elements of the marble block stay together, and which are discarded, no longer part of the statue itself. The idea of the form in the sculptor's mind enables him to organise and construct relations between different parts of the material stuff which makes up the statue. In the case of natural organisms, the process is, in some respects, similar but the external agent is removed and the form directly organises the matter. *Phthorá*, however, is a consequence of a

¹³ Aristotle, *Parts of Animals* 640b 130 ff.

¹⁴ Clarke, *Aristotle's Man* p. 166.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Meteorology* 379a 11ff.

reversal of this normal directionality.

This case of matter determining and, eventually, eroding form, is less immediately comprehensible. Why should it be that matter interferes with form to the eventual necessary destruction of that form? Aristotle's answer consists in pointing out that entities come into being out of material that is 'contrary' to the form, since 'everything that comes to be, comes into being from its contrary and passes away likewise into a substrate by the action of the contrary into the contrary.'¹⁶ This is the case, despite the Aristotelian observation that form is the very aspect of the entity that marks it out as this thing.

Entities are formed out of the material substrate and return back to it, as matter is enformed and then loses its form. But *phthorá* differs from coming to be, because it is not an action of the entity but rather something to be suffered, since it does not necessarily involve movement or action from an external agent:

In time, all things come into being and pass away ... nothing comes into being without itself moving somehow and acting but a thing can be destroyed even if it does not move at all.¹⁷

Why does Aristotle argue that this reduction into its material components is a necessary feature of the life of entities? The case of natural organisms is the clearest example of this tendency in Aristotle thought, and the objection that he makes to Empedocles' account of the nature of plants provides a clue. Whilst Aristotle objects that the account offered by Empedocles fails to explain why the plant does not fly apart, and amends this account by positing the unifying capacity of the soul, it would presumably be true to argue that in the absence of the soul, such destruction would, indeed, take place. It is when the unifying of the diverse elements fails, that the organic entity decays, since the elements which go to form the entity each have their 'proper place' and the unifying form must eventually fail to constrain these elements:

The incapacities of animals, age, decay, and the like are all unnatural due, it seems, to the fact that the whole animal complex is made up of material which differ in respect of their proper places, and no single part occupies its own place. If, therefore, that which is primary contains nothing unnatural, being simple and unmixed and in its proper place and having no contrary, then it has no place for incapacity, nor, consequently for retardation or,

¹⁶ Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 270a 23f.

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Physics* IV, 222b 19f.

since acceleration involves retardation, for acceleration.¹⁸

The matter that goes up to make an organism then, is neutral; 'simple and unmixed' in a way that the unified organism is not. When a unified organism imposes form on this matter, the material is dislocated; removed from its proper place, and this sets up the dynamic tension that will eventually lead to the decay of the whole organism. In the end, the organism is bound to die, because of the nature of the matter from which it is composed. This is what D. Williams calls

the obscure but important Aristotelian suggestion ... that matter is , as it were, a real entity but a negative entity, like a negative charge or a negative number, which neutralises and obliterates, saps and subtracts from, a local quota of form.¹⁹

So the notion of *phthorá* rests on the tension between matter and form, and the lack of congruity between them. It stems from the multiplicity of elements that go to make up the unified being.

There is an exceptional case in the general account of organic hylomorphism where form and matter are not congruous from the very beginning of the entity. This exception to the normal course of things is how Aristotle explains monstrosities or freaks of nature. These are the results when the formal nature has not mastered the material nature. Nevertheless, the assertion of matter over form in this case still permits even the monstrosities to be conceived of as in some sense natural.

whenever things occur contrary to the established order but still always in a certain way and not at random, the results seems to be less of a monstrosity because even that which is contrary to nature is in a certain sense according to nature, whenever, that is, the formal nature has not mastered the material nature.²⁰

This exceptional case is however, coherent with the general account of coming to be and passing away as the enforming of matter, and the subsequent throwing off of the form. The case of a monstrosity is a special case only in that the form fails fully to appropriate the matter.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *On the Heavens* 288b 15f.

¹⁹ Williams, D. C., 'Form and Matter, II' *Philosophical Review* 67 (1958) 499-521, p.502.

²⁰ Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals* 770b 16f.

Finally, Aristotle's outline of the cause of the eternal nature of *phthorá* in *On Generation and Decay* needs to be considered. He argues that, since the heavenly bodies are in eternal motion, the sun approaches and move away from any fixed point on the earth's surface, and it is this that produces eternal generation, but this motion of the sun must be divided into two if it is to explain both *genesis* and *phthorá*. Aristotle points to an explanation of these two phenomenon by virtue of the two halves of the motion of the sun in an ellipse. Successive approaches of the sun cause the development of organisms to their mature form, whereas successive retreats cause them to decay. This movement sets a limit on the life of animals, and explains their successive maturity and decline. In Marx's discussion of the decay of social organisms, this role of the sun approaching and retreating is played by production and consumption, so that in more than one way is it true that, as Marx puts it in the *German Ideology*: 'In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here it is a matter of ascending from earth to heaven.'²¹

It is important to note that Aristotle's account of the subversive effect that matter has upon form is outlined in the biological treatises, and the metaphysics, rather than in his *Politics* or *Ethics*. For the picture is somewhat different there. Aristotle's account of the state is indeed both organic and hylomorphic, but it does not involve a positing of *phthorá*. In fact, the opposite tends to be true, as Barker indicates in his commentary on the *Politics*:

Generally it may be answered, Aristotle does assume congruity [between matter and form (J.P.)]: the end for the sake of which movement arises finds a necessary material suited to itself and to movement towards itself. But it is not always so: a matter may exist that is not congruent with form, and that matter may limit the extent to which movement attains its form. In politics, the primary matter may be so rude, that the movement from it never reaches a constitution, but stops at a tribal state; or again, it may be less rude, but yet so imperfect, that the movement, while attaining a constitution, attains a 'perverted' constitution.²²

Aristotle's assumption of congruity in the *Politics* is at least a partial explanation of certain aspects of his political thought; the justification of slavery and the attitude that he takes to women, for example. It is one source of the relatively conservative nature of his political thought. But the opposite assumption, of discongruity, in his writings on the metaphysics of organisms is at least equally significant, and it is this assumption that is implicated in later developments of

²¹ Marx, K., *The German Ideology* in CW 5, p. 36.

²² Barker, E., *The Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (London, 1906) p. 220.

the hylomorphic conception of organic social entities that is present in Marx. In this way, the *Critique of Hegel's Doctrine of the State* is a surrogate for a critique of Aristotle's *Politics*, where the same assumptions of the congruity of essence and existence are expressed. For Aristotle and Hegel, the state acts as a terminus for the human struggle to be free, but for Marx, the contradiction between form and matter requires a different model of freedom, conceived as the realisation of the human essence through the transformation of the limiting conditions imposed by the external world. That transformation of the social form that governs social matter, only arises on the assumption of discongruity in the first place. Here, Marx uses Aristotle against himself, implicitly posing the account of *phthorá* against the static conservatism of the *Politics*.

Marx's Conception of the Decay of Social Organisms

It will be readily admitted that Marx saw bourgeois society as a temporary phenomenon; and that it would cease to be. But is there any evidence that he employed the Aristotelian account of *phthorá* in outlining its process of ceasing to be?

First, it might be helpful to indicate what sort of questions this perspective is directed at. Did Marx consider bourgeois society to be analogous to an organism? Was he aware of the notion of *phthorá* that Aristotle and the ancients employed? Did he distinguish between form and matter in a quasi-Aristotelian way? and finally, does his actual prognosis for capitalism marry up to the Aristotelian account of *phthorá*? If, as I shall show, the answer to these questions is a virtually unqualified affirmative, then the substantive thesis that Marx borrows the outlines of his social ontology from Aristotle will emerge strengthened.

The attraction of Marx for organic terminology is manifested throughout his works. Phenomena are constantly described as 'unripe' or 'ripe', 'healthy' or 'rotten' and such terms as 'womb', 'gestation' and 'senescence' recur throughout the early works and in what Engels called the 'thick books' of political economy. The *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* enthusiastically endorses the idea that social structures should be viewed as organisms or organic wholes, and often describes them in this way. But it is particularly in the *Grundrisse* that Marx's continual turn to organic terminology is at its most prevalent and he manifests his commitment to an organic mode of explanation explicitly and systematically. His account of the totality of the bourgeois system is an account of the inter-linking elements of an organic whole, and a reiteration of the Schellingian process of subsumption, which he uses in the account of the real and formal subsumption of labour under capital. It is, as in the Aristotelian account of *genesis*, the notion of

the subsuming of disparate moments; under one overall principle that makes a system complete:

While in the completed bourgeois system every economic relation presupposes every other in its bourgeois form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with any organic system. This organic system itself, as a totality, has its presuppositions, and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the organs which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality.²³

In this dimension of totality, and its consequent conceptualisation as an organism, the bourgeois system differs from preceding forms; as is plain from Marx's analysis of pre-capitalist social forms.²⁴ The key process in this is the separation of labour from its conditions of production, which makes the bourgeois system more complete, and more comprehensively organic than previously existing systems. For Marx, capitalism was an organic form of society *par excellence*.

Phthorá in the Grundrisse

Marx was familiar with the Aristotelian texts that contain references to the processes of passing away, since he cites many of them in his Doctoral Dissertation and in the notebooks on the philosophy of Epicurus. What is more, he discusses *phthorá* in detail in the Grundrisse, where he uses the notion of the tension between matter and form to explain the special qualities of labour that lie at the heart of his exposition of the labour theory of value in *Capital*. This mode of explanation works at both a micro level, where it refers to the need for a principle of maintenance in the products of past human labour, and on the macro level, where Marx conceives of the capitalist organism as positing its own limits through the eventual restriction of production which constitutes the decay of that organism.

In *Capital* Marx begins his exposition with simple commodity production and embarks on a search for the value adding element in capitalist production, going through a conceptual strip-tease before fixing on labour as this special commodity. It is the special qualities of labour, he argues, that allows the transition from M-C-M to M-C-M', that is fundamental to the structuring of the capitalist social form. This is because of the special qualities that labour possesses as a value adding element in the production process. But the way in which Marx encountered these special qualities of labour, is not necessarily parallel to his exposition of

²³ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 278.

²⁴ See Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 471-514.

them in *Capital*, as he himself makes clear in the Second Post Face to *Capital* where he distinguishes, as we have seen between the mode of presentation and the mode of inquiry. In fact, Marx is already confident that he has found this value adding element, having investigated the ontological nature of labour in the *Grundrisse*.

So the account of the special qualities of labour that Marx lays out in the *Grundrisse* provides the foundation for the account of commodity production in *Capital*. One section from Notebook Three in particular, gives a profound understanding of what it was that Marx saw as so special about the nature of labour and its role in the simple productive process, but it is out of place, because of the slightly disorganised way that the *Grundrisse* presents work in progress. Marx reminds us, and himself, that the discussion he presents of the special quality of labour should have been incorporated into the discussion of production in general that he outlines in the 1857 Introduction, noting that: ‘(all this belongs already in the first chapter on production in general.)’²⁵ From this point of view, the distinctive approach to the account of the general productive process indicates the posits and constraints which flow from the combination of an unstated ontology derived from Aristotle and a critique of classical political economy.

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The basic model of the simple production process that Marx has in mind, is of the manipulation of raw materials with tools, working up objects until they are of an appropriate form for consumption that satisfies human needs. Marx looks at this

²⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 360.

²⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 360.

process in detail, and stage by stage. In particular, he freezes it at an intermediate point to look at partially worked up objects, and to investigate their constitution and prospects. Partially worked up objects, beyond mere raw materials, but not yet consumable use values, present a number of problems. They would appear to have value by virtue of the past labour that has been employed in them. But this itself is problematic: 'objectified labour time exists in a one-side, objective form, in which as a mere thing it is at the prey of chemical decay etc.'²⁷ The process of *phthorá* threatens these objects; they are liable to decay, in which the past labour used up in them is wasted. Recalling that decay is a result of the tension between matter and form, and reminding himself of some Aristotelian metaphysics at the same time, Marx analyses these partially worked up objects as follows:

There is an indifference on the part of the substance [*Stoff*] toward the form, which develops out of merely objectified labour time, in whose objective existence labour has become the merely vanished, *external form* of its natural substance, existing merely in the external form of the substantial [*das Stoffliche*] (eg. the form of the table for wood, of the form of the cylinder for iron); no immanent law of reproduction maintains this form in the way in which the tree for example maintains its form as a tree (wood maintains itself in the specific form of the tree because this form is a form of the wood while the form of the table is accidental for wood and not the intrinsic form of its substance): it exists only as a form external to the substance, or it exists only as a substance [*stofflich*] The dissolution to which its substance is prey therefore dissolves the form as well.²⁸

Because artifacts are unlike the wood that composes trees, they are subject to decay, and the dead labour that would give them value is vulnerable to the same processes. Because there is no immanent law that unifies the form and matter contained in these objects, they are caught in a half way house between being products and raw materials. As such they are unpreserved, and deficient in use value. In the absence of labour, 'the use value of cotton and twist, material and form would be botched; it would be destroyed instead of produced.'²⁹

²⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 360.

²⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 360. Note that both Nicolaus and McLellan translate *Stoff* and its variants in this passage as substance, rather than matter or stuff, although the German word allows both translations. The frequent occurrence of the term is marked; cf. Dietz Verlag edition p. 266. The philosophical contrast though, might be rendered clearer by using the latter term. The distinction is important, because matter is a mass noun and does not permit a plural, whereas substance does. Hence 'a matter' is incomprehensible, but 'a substance' is straight forward..

²⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 361.

This contrast, between the relations between form and matter that apply to artifacts and the different relations that apply to natural organisms, is drawn straight from Aristotle.³⁰ The key distinction that Marx makes, between artifacts and organisms, and the categories that he employs; form, matter, and immanent law are deeply implicated in Aristotle's metaphysics. Marx's problem: how to make sense of the preservation of value in the partially worked up objects of the labour process, only makes sense on the basis of the Aristotelian distinction between natural organisms and artifacts, and this distinction is fundamentally between two different types of relation between matter and form. His search for something to take the place of the immanent law of reproduction that organisms contain within themselves, is a search for an activity or principle that fills out an Aristotelian category. The importance of the distinction in Aristotle can hardly be overestimated. Perhaps the most clear exposition of the distinction comes from the second book of the *Physics*:

Of things that exist, some exist by nature, some from other causes. "By nature" the animals and their parts exist and the plants and the simple bodies (earth, fire, air and water) - for we say that these things and the like exist "by nature."

All the things mentioned present a feature in which they differ from things which are not constituted by nature. Each of them has within itself a principle of motion and of stationariness (in respect of place, or of growth and decrease, or by way of alteration). On the other hand a bed and a coat and anything else of that sort, *qua* receiving these designations - i.e. in so far as they are products of art - have no innate impulse to change.³¹

What is missing from artifacts is, then, just this principle of preservation and change; of growth and decrease, that organisms possess, of their nature, simply because they are constituted by nature. The special quality of labour, on which Marx sets so much store, is precisely that it fills this role. In order to bring partially worked up objects into being as objects with a use value, they need to be posited as moments of living labour. It is living labour, an irreducibly teleological

³⁰ Gould argues that the distinctive form of labour in this respect is an example of the Hegelian notion of determinate negation: that a given stage or moment is negated by being preserved in a new or higher form (Gould, *Marx's Social Ontology* p.57). But this is a second order concept, answering the question of how the previous stage is preserved, not why it is in need of preservation. The reason for introducing this special quality of labour is that it is necessary for Marx to fill the role played by the soul as the unifying activity in organisms that staves off *phthorá*, and so it relies on the Aristotelian distinction between artifacts and organisms. Subsuming the two different sources of unification under the category of determinate negation conflates this distinction which Marx clearly specifies in this section of the *Grundrisse*.

³¹ Aristotle, *Physics* 192b 8-18.

process, that comes to the rescue by preserving these artifact that would otherwise decay:

The transformation of the material by living labour, by the realisation of living labour in the material - a transformation which, as purpose, determines labour and is its purposeful activation ... thus preserves the material in a definite form, and subjugates the transformation of the material to the purpose of labour. *Labour is the form giving fire*; it is the transitoriness of things, their temporality, as their formation by living labour time'³²

'Labour is the form giving fire': with this expression, Marx isolates the special quality of labour that he is after. Labour plays the role of the form giving, unifying element that both preserves the value that inheres in the objects and advances them towards the stage where they can become objects of consumption. One way Marx describes this ontological process is particularly instructive: he states that when the products of dead labour are posited as conditions of living labour, they are themselves 'reanimated':³³ from dead objects they are resurrected, by becoming the objects of living labour. The parallels with Aristotle's account of the soul are obvious: just as the soul animates the body of man (thus the Latin title of Aristotle's work: *De Anima*), labour is the unifying, revivifying activity that brings objects back into the organically conceived production process. It enables these objects to be enformed into consumable items. At this point, the objects are decomposed, and the cycle can begin again. Even this process of consumption is described in Aristotelian terms; as the suspension of form:

In each of these subsequent processes, the material has obtained a more useful form, a form making it more appropriate for consumption; until it has obtained at the end the form in which it can directly become an object of consumption, when therefore, the consumption of the material and the suspension of its form satisfies a human need, and its transformation is the same as its use.³⁴

The labour then, that works up the object, is also the mechanism by which the objects of production become objects of consumption. This is the mechanism by which production and consumption in the simple labour process are made to correspond; not, it should be noticed, through the influence of Say's law or any of the market mechanisms posited by the Classical school.

³² Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 360-1, (my italics).

³³ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 360.

³⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 361.

Aristotelian terminology is applied throughout the discussion of production in general and its nature, although it is true that Marx's use of terms such as form, substance, matter and decay are here applied to middle sized material objects. Nevertheless the analysis undertaken is both valuable in itself and prefigures the wider picture of the *phthorá* of social forms which I shall examine later.

Marx is concerned with *phthorá* in two senses. First he seems to have in mind the purely chemical degeneration of objects, through such processes as rust, rot and so on. This is a matter of time and various physical processes acting on material objects. It refers to the decay of objects as objects, and is generated by their particular material existence. This is, of course, an important and irreducible part of every day human existence. But there is a second sense in which Marx is concerned about the process: the decay of objects as use values. His central example is of the working up of cotton into twist, (the twine or thread into which cotton is spun), cloth and then garments. The degradation which encroaches on each stage of the process is not just physical and thus specific to the article under consideration but endemic to the productive process. It can only stem from the need to keep production of use values going, in order to satisfy human needs and thus shows the inter relatedness of the man - productive activity - nature triple. Humans are constantly producing: this is the basic existent, not just because objects decay but because humans need to constantly consume in order to stay alive, and therefore need to produce use values for consumption. Only when dead labour is posited as the object of living labour can it survive against the biological needs of human kind. It is as if consumption is a constant drain - a constant source of decay in the second, metaphysical sense, which means production which does not deliver the goods; consumption goods, is 'dead' labour.

without further labour the use value of cotton and twist, material and form would be botched; it would be destroyed instead of produced. Material as well as form, substance like form, are preserved by further labour - preserved as use value, until they obtain the form of use value as such, whose use is consumption.³⁵

When Marx argues that it is the preservation of use values, and not just the creation of use values that requires the input of labour, he necessarily posits the existence of a tendency to decay. It is important to notice for Marx that this is all inherent in the simple production process:

³⁵ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 361.

This preservation of labour as product - of the use value of the product of labour by its becoming the raw material of new labour, being again posited as material objectivity of purposeful living labour. - is given in the simple production process.³⁶

But when we come to consumption the picture is not much better. Having been formed and reformed the object is realised in consumption. It gains determinate existence. But the realisation of the commodity is also its destruction, its return to its elements, its loss of form, its decomposition. Back in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Marx enhances the point that 'The product only obtains its "last finish" in consumption. A railway on which no trains run, hence which is not used up, consumed, is a railway only *potentially*, and not in reality.'³⁷

In this case the moment of actualisation - the moment of consumption - is also moment of decomposition as it is in the return of the commodity to its material basis that the final finish is given. 'Only by decomposing the product does consumption give the product the finishing touch.'³⁸

The Aristotelian chain of coming-to-be and passing-away is thus exemplified in the production process of the *Grundrisse*. The labour of man is an unending Herculean labour: that is one reason why labour in the sense of general productive activity is at the core of Marx's social ontology. If production is left half done, the use values wither, but even if the working up of forms reaches its apex, it is only for the final form to be destroyed. There is, in these two ways a constant draining away of form from the objects of production, which is as constant as the gravitational pull on the rocks of Hercules. This in turn necessitates the continuous cycle of production itself revealing the magical properties; 'the form giving fire', which can resist this force. At the level of the whole social organism, the implication is that in the absence of productive activity, the whole social loses its form.

While this set of problems is posed in the discussion of production in general, it is still necessary to work out what happens at the level of the enformed capitalist organism. Here Marx points out that the special quality of labour; that it preserves use values, is hidden from our immediate gaze, by the second order mediations that structure the ontologically basic triple at this level; under the social form of capital, labour is not recognised on this qualitative dimension; this special quality is, and Marx argues that it has to be, annexed to capital. This occurs because the

³⁶ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 362.

³⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 91. 'potentially' is in Greek in the original

³⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 91.

quality in question is a quality of all living labour, and capital pays labour for a quantity of living labour, but not for any of its unique qualities; including the quality of preserving the labour that is already objectified.

Marx's account of the dialectic between labour and capital rests on the separation of labour from raw materials, and tools, but, in the production process, even the production process under capital, this separation is temporarily removed, ('suspended') as labour uses tools to work on raw materials. But, under the domination of capital, this ongoing labour is incorporated into capital, in the respect that it has this quality of preserving old values. This quality is part of the natural way in which labour operates in the simple production process, and hence part of the use value of labour, but the use value of labour belongs to the capitalist so that labour's 'living quality of preserving objectified labour time, by using it as the objective condition of living labour in the production process is *none of the worker's business*.³⁹ The worker simply has nothing to do with this special quality that labour possesses: s/he is alienated from it. While this quality resides in the structuring of a natural process, since production always involves the preservation of the substance of past labour, under the reign of capital, this 'form giving fire' is annexed to capital:

"The process of the realisation of capital proceeds by means of and within the simple production process, by putting living labour into its natural relation with its moments of material being. But to the extent that labour steps into this relation, this relation exists not for itself, but for capital; labour itself has already become a moment of capital.⁴⁰

The crucial modification that occurs when the production process is mediated under capital then is not the appearance or disappearance of this special quality; the ability of labour to stave off *phthorá*. This is part of the simple production process, and a natural quality of labour. In this respect, the natural quality of labour is an aspect of the matter of any social entity. What does change though, is the question of how this quality is to be realised; under the social form of capital, it is activated only at the whim of capital. Labour, including its special quality, is governed by the form of capital, unleashed at its whim, and restrained by its fiat. It is restrained when it is not in the interests of capital to unleash this natural property of labour:

eg. in times of stagnation of trade etc. the mills are shut down, then it can indeed be seen that the machinery rusts away and that the yarn is useless

³⁹ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 364 (my italics).

⁴⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 364.

ballast and rots, as soon as their connection with living labour ceases.⁴¹

Marx has moved from the terrain of the micro level account of the simple production process to a discussion that implicitly involves the level of the social whole; a discussion of crisis. Aristotelianism enters here, since what a crisis consists in, is the suspension of labour, conceived in the manner outlined above as the form giving fire and the activity that staves of the process of *phthorá*. When labour is constrained, the decay process kicks in once again, and the production and reproduction of human social existence under capital is attenuated. This is the consequence when the capitalist social form generates overproduction and thus stalls the production process itself, leading to the decay of the whole social organism, as its matter; the productive process itself, begins to determine the form: the capitalist social relations that govern it. Marx's understanding of the specific principles that are involved in Aristotle's concept of *phthorá* are applied not only in the account of the special nature of labour as the principle of maintenance of the use values of past productive activity on a micro level, but also in his account of how capitalism itself declines.

Phthorá in the Account of Capitalism

Marx's account of capitalist crisis is perhaps the most obvious manifestation of the way in which his ontological assumptions clash with those of Ricardo and Sismondi. But what is seldom noticed is that his account of 'the great thunderstorms which increasingly threaten [capital] as the foundation of society and of production itself'⁴² is premised on an Aristotelian understanding of hylomorphic organicism. McCarthy suggests that the 'parallels to Marx's method in *Capital* are too strong to be dismissed'⁴³, but it is more than that; Marx takes Ricardo, Sismondi and MacCulloch to task, in a critique that owes its roots directly to an understanding of Aristotelian hylomorphism.

Ricardo and his school, Marx argues 'never understood the really modern crises'⁴⁴ and at root this is because he 'conceived production as directly identical with the self realisation of capital' and is hence heedless of the barriers thrown up to capitalism. Instead, Ricardo expects capital to overcome the barriers to its expansion and sees this overcoming as proceeding from the essence of capital itself. He is therefore one sided in his account, better grasping the positive essence of capital than Sismondi, but failing to see the tension between matter and form, between social production and private accumulation that spells doom for the rule

⁴¹ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 365.

⁴² Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 411.

⁴³ McCarthy, *Marx and the Ancients*, p. 117.

⁴⁴ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 411.

of capital.

When Marx comes to deal with the Swiss, Simonde de Sismondi, he encounters an author who has made a decisive break with the orthodox doctrine of the classics. In particular, Sismondi rejected the classical theory of markets, and the assumption of identity between demand and supply. This assumption had meant that, for Say and Ricardo, the only possibility of crisis came from external, contingent circumstances, and not from the discongruity of the system itself. The Russian author Rubin, one of the best commentators on Marx's political economy, argued that the classical theory 'was blind to the fundamental contradictions of capitalist economy, depicting it instead as a unified whole distinguished by a perfectly mutual adjustment and harmonious development of all its parts.'⁴⁵

Sismondi, on the other hand, does appreciate that capital throws up barriers and has an intuition that they will bring its downfall. Because of this, Sismondi has better grasped 'the limited nature of production based on capital, its negative one-sidedness'. His solution though, reveals that he has not fully understood the nature of the entity in question. It is to 'put up barriers to production, from the outside, through custom, law, etc.,' These took three forms: First, he aimed to restrain the declining standards of living of the workers, by proposing the right of workers to form combinations, a prohibition on child labour, a mandatory rest day on Sunday, and a requirement that capitalist entrepreneurs were to provide upkeep to their workers during times of sickness and unemployment. Secondly, he hoped to sustain his preferred form of production modelled on the patriarchal peasant and handicraft economies of his native Switzerland, a preservation that brought with it political and social advantages since 'a numerous class of peasant proprietors provides a guarantee for the maintenance of the existing order.'⁴⁶ Thirdly, he aimed to limit the volume of industrial production through the slower introduction of machinery, arguing, in a romantic fashion, that 'distress has reached such depths that one could begin to regret the progress of a civilisation which ... has only multiplied poverty.'⁴⁷

For Marx such measures are not condemned primarily because they have a reactionary political content, (though some of them clearly do) but because they are themselves doomed to fail. Such 'external and artificial barriers' would

⁴⁵ Rubin., I. I., *A History of Economic Thought* (London, 1979) p. 338-9.

⁴⁶ Sismondi, S., *Nouveau Principes d'Economie Politique* Vol. I, cited in Rubin, A *History of Economic Thought* p. 344.

⁴⁷ Sismondi, *Nouveau Principes* Vol. II (1819 edition) p. 328, cited in Rubin, A *History of Economic Thought* p. 344.

'necessarily be demolished by capital.'⁴⁸ Their weakness lies in precisely the features that Marx isolates; their externality and artificiality can be no threat to a natural and internally regulating social organism which will overcome such barriers. It is as futile to pin hope on such measures as it is to hope indefinitely to postpone the death of an organism through external interference.⁴⁹ The conception that Marx works on here is of a social organism whose matter is incongruous with its form; if we either assume congruity, or hope to overcome the incongruity from outside, we misunderstand the system.

Sismondi is an interesting example partly because he also relies on an Aristotelian reading of economics, condemning the way that the classical economists had turned political economy into *chrematistike*. This is Aristotle's term for the unnatural science of increasing wealth for its own sake. While Marx built upon this aspect of Aristotle's work, it clearly does not provide the only basis for his critique of the classical economists and Sismondi, since Sismondi himself shares that Aristotelian slant. Instead it is necessary to move beyond what Aristotle says on the subject of economics to look at his wider physical and metaphysical postulates and the way that organic hylomorphism underpins Marx's mode of analysis.

Marx's critique of MacCulloch is also illuminating; MacCulloch simply assumes away the problem of the tension between production under capital and production in general with which Marx grapples. He does this by reducing the former to the latter:

In order to rescue production based on capital, ... all its specific qualities are ignored and their specific character as forms omitted, and capital is conceived as its inverse, as simple production for immediate use value. Totally abstracts away the essential relations. In fact, in order to cleanse it of contradictions, it is virtually dropped and negated.⁵⁰

The essential relations of production based on capital are the opposite of simple production for immediate use value: on the one hand is the essence of capital governed production, on the other is the transhistorical production in general one is transhistorical and the other is historically specific and the two are in tension; the

⁴⁸ Marx, *Grundrisse* p.411.

⁴⁹ Was Marx right about this? It is only possible here to sketch a very partial response, but in Britain it must certainly be arguable; Capital has certainly rolled over many of the rights to combination in the last fifteen years, through a series of laws restricting Trade Union action, and has moved decisively, and successfully, against the idea of a rest day on Sunday, at least in the consumer goods sector. This has involved it in conflicts which see the shop workers union USDAW allied with the Christian Keep Sunday Special campaign.

⁵⁰ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 411.

second is dislocated by the form of the first. Production in general has, as its natural and essential goal, the production of use values; whereas production under capital demands production for the accumulation of capital. The only way that MacCulloch can cleanse capital of its contradictions is to pretend that it is, in fact, its opposite. Naturally, this does not mean that production of use value does not take place, under the rule of capital, but that this enformed matter is in tension with its form. The Aristotelian implication is clear. MacCulloch is condemned by Marx for resolving the tension between form and matter simply by intellectual fiat, by removing form in thought.

Marx's account of the relation between capital and production reflects the usual apparent schizophrenia with respect to capitalism that Marx often displays. On one hand he praises the way that 'production founded on capital' creates universal industriousness, freeing up the fixity that characterises pre-capitalist social relations, expanding human horizons and having 'a great civilising influence'. It is not too confining to Marx's thought to see this as a parallel to Aristotle's double understanding of the natural status of *phthorá*, discussed above. It is the case that Marx admires capitalism in its youth, but that, as the organism grows old and tired, there is also present the assumption that it will cease to be. Nevertheless, in its very quest for universalising, capital creates its own finiteness; capital poses limits as things to be overcome, and its self perception is universalistic:

The universality to which it continually strives encounters barriers in its own nature, which will, at a certain stage of its development, allow it to be recognised as being itself the greatest barrier to this tendency, and hence will drive towards its own suspension.⁵¹

Marx then describes the limits of capital which

coincide with the nature of capital, with the essential character of its very concept 1) necessary labour as limit on the exchange value of living labour capacity 2) surplus value as the limit on surplus labour time, and in regard to relative surplus time as barrier to the development of the forces of production 3) transformation into money exchange value as such as the limit of production 4) the restriction of the production of use values by exchange value'

In all these cases it is the restriction on production that is the most essential barrier thrown up to the expansion of capital. Once again Marx rehearses the view

⁵¹ Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 409-10.

that it is productive activity, albeit in the specifically capitalist form of labour, that is the unifying principle of the capitalist mode of production. Living labour is what makes the organism live:

To approach the matter more closely: First of all, there is a limit not inherent to production generally, but to production founded on capital. This limit is double, or rather the same regarded from two directions. It is enough here to demonstrate that capital contains a particular restriction of production - which contradicts its general tendency to drive beyond every barrier to production - in order to have uncovered the foundation of overproduction, the fundamental contradiction of developed capital; in order to have uncovered more generally, the fact that capital is not, as the economists believe, the absolute form for the development of the productive forces - not the absolute form for that, nor the form of wealth which absolutely coincides with the development of the forces of production ... These inherent limits have to coincide with the nature of capital, with the essential character of its very concept.⁵²

In *Capital*, Marx is more directly concerned with the falling rate of profit which he sees as the mechanism by which Capitalism meets its end, But even here, what is enmeshed in the theory is the dominance of dead labour over living labour, and thus a feature of his Aristotelianism.

Marx's conviction that capitalism was not a permanent feature of human life is expressed in all his works on political economy. However, this conviction is expressive of ontological commitments and these are at their clearest in the *Grundrisse*. Elster has argued that Marx's account of the crises that capitalism undergoes are largely vacuous because it lacks micro foundations. I have argued that those micro foundations do exist, and they are contained in the analytical principles that Marx borrows from Aristotle and applies to middle sized organisms; these he says, necessarily decay unless continually worked up, given form and preserved, and only labour can do this. What is more, at the level of social organisms, similar principles apply, and the relations between form and matter are not stable or unilinear. This is what the political economists miss, and why their explanation are inadequate. Both sets of analysis rely on the distinction between form and matter, and the dynamic relations between the two, but they can also be construed as micro and macro explanations of the same phenomenon; the decay of a social organism. If however, such explanations are ruled out by fiat, then new ontological commitments and explanatory models must be employed. I now turn to one example: the sort of methodological individualism proposed by

⁵² Marx, *Grundrisse*, p. 415.

Elster and other Analytical Marxists.

CHAPTER EIGHT
MARXISM AND METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM

*one should not ask if the soul and the body are one, any more than one should ask of the wax and the shape or in general of the matter of anything and that of which it is the matter.*¹

Introduction

It has already been argued that questions of ontological commitment have political and ideological implications, since the choice of ontology has a deep bearing on the selection of the questions that are asked in social theory, and what counts as plausible answers to those questions. Nowhere is this more clear than in the debates over methodological individualism (hereafter MI). The partially obscured political and ideological issues that emerge in the debates over MI go to the core of the 'crisis of Marxism' and entail the question of whether, and to what extent a Marxian methodology is implicated in the practice of Stalinism.

The most important and serious charge against Marx, is that his holistic method is implicated in the authoritarian practices pursued by regimes that acted in his name. Critics who take this line diagnose holism as the central error in Marx's account of the nature of capitalist society. This holism, it is alleged, suppresses, or at least permits the suppression of the rights and autonomy of the individual, both theoretically and practically. This is Marx's greatest fault, for which the prescription is a dose of individualism in many varying forms; economic, ethical, and most seriously for present purposes, methodological.

Methodological individualism is prescribed for two reasons, apparently mutually incompatible. Either MI is set against the holistic method of Marx and consequently its political forms *tout court*. This is the argument pursued by Popper and Hayek. In the hands of Jon Elster, however, MI is designated the role of rescuing the ethically and intellectually acceptable elements of Marxism; what (little) there is that is alive in Marx, in an operation that allows us to 'make sense' of him. Arguably, however, both positions could be conflated after analysis. What both sets of critics have in common is that the view that Marx's method is mistaken and dangerous, and they therefore advocate its replacement by an individualist methodology. Furthermore, seldom do they acknowledge the possibility of distinguishing between ontological and explanatory priority in social theory or the possibility that methodological considerations are preceded by ontological ones. To put it another way, what is missing from the debate is the

¹ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 1412b 6-8.

back drop consideration that what there is, comes before what explains what.

In this chapter I argue that what motivates Marx in his complex methodological stance is not a psychological predilection to authoritarianism, speculation, or holism. Rather, Marx's methodology is premised on an Aristotelian ontology. It is only recently that such an ontology has been widely discussed in the literature of analytical philosophy but such discussion allows us to see its power and range. The discussions of Aristotle's metaphysics, recent neo-Aristotelianism and Marx's social ontology, have laid the foundation for an investigation of the claims of the methodological individualists. This chapter will therefore offer a synthesis of these elements into an investigation of the claim that Marx's methodological commitments prefigure in some way the practice of totalitarianism.

But first it is necessary to be clear about what this claim amounts to. The technique pursued is first to outline the commitments involved in MI, to examine its ontological presuppositions. Secondly I will look at the interpretation of Marx offered by Elster, who himself espouses MI. In accordance with the aim and as is customary in the extensive literature, I distinguish between the prior ontological view associated with MI of metaphysical individualism and different versions of the explanatory claims involved in MI. I then reintroduce a distinction, and an idea drawn from Aristotelian and neo-Aristotelian metaphysics; the distinction between form and matter, and the idea of substance sortals with characteristic careers. Retranslating the distinction between structure and agency, individuals and social relations into one between form and matter, and the interplay between them, stresses the Aristotelian element in social theory and, unsurprisingly in view of his intellectual history, simultaneously expresses the spirit of what Marx has to say on these issues.

What is necessary for the existence of a social entity is not necessarily what explains its behaviour, just as matter in Aristotelian metaphysics does not entirely fulfil the explanatory role in the changing entities that populate the world. Despite the view that matter is, in some sense, all there is, since form is not some entity added to matter, but just the organisation of matter into a substance, form enters into explanation at every point, until the entity goes through a process of *phthorá* and form breaks down as a source of explanation. But MI expresses an unwillingness to consider social forms as causally effective and so makes problematic the ontological background to the explanatory claims of the individualists. Developing this distinction between ontological and explanatory priority indicates that the claims of MI either reduce to trivial statements about the components of society with little or no explanatory power or are

straightforwardly false.

Anti-individualism: The Charge against Marx

The critics of Marx who advocate the adoption of MI claim that Marx is guilty of a creeping totalitarianism in his espousal of methodological collectivism. Elster, for example argues that what makes dropping methodological collectivism and its corollary, a speculative theory of history, important for Marxism (as opposed to Marx interpretation), is the supposed political implications. The main objection to speculative theories of history is not their intellectual faults: these

are of little import compared to the political disasters they can inspire... as philosophy of history that allows one to regard pre-communist individuals as so many sheep for the slaughter.²

Likewise for the critics of the forties and fifties, such as Hayek, Watkins, and Popper, who were writing in an intellectual atmosphere dominated by the Cold War. The individualistic programmes of Popper³ and Hayek⁴ were animated by hostility to what they saw as the 'totalitarianism' of left and right. Responding to the brutalities of the great 'collectivist,' Stalin, they aimed to condemn all sorts of methodological holism as precursors to a political practice that sacrificed individuals. This is most thoroughly worked through in Popper's opposition to Marx and Marxism, and particularly succinct in the claim of Watkins that MI is a practice that:

encourages innocent explanations but forbids sinister explanations of the widespread existence of a disposition among members of a social group.⁵

It is therefore somewhat surprising to find theorists who see themselves as sympathetic to Marx proclaiming their allegiance to this methodological approach. MI Marxism takes a slightly different tack from the MI critics of Marx by arguing that what can be saved in Marxism is not a method, but rather a series of insights, and that the political problems faced by Marxism minus MI necessitate redrawing it with this new, neutral methodological weapon. So MI is proposed as a kill or cure solution to the chronic ailment of Marxism.

² Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* pp. 117-118.

³ Popper, K., *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London, 1945).

⁴ Hayek, F. A., *The Road to Serfdom* (London, 1944) and Hayek, F. A., *Individualism: true or false?* (Oxford, 1946).

⁵ Watkins, J. W. N., 'Methodological Individualism and Social Tendencies' in Brodbeck (ed.) *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* (New York, Macmillan, 1968), p. 274.

One problematic issue, here, is the status of the problems cited by the individualist critics: the arena of the charge of anti-individualism is political but it is intended to be rectified by a methodological shift. But for Marx, his methodology was deduced from his conception of the world, of what sort of things existed in it and what sort of connections there were between these things:

in the first place [*De prime abord*] I do not start out from concepts, hence I do not start out from the 'concept of value', and do not have 'to divide' these in any way. What I start out from is the simplest social form in which the labour product is presented in in contemporary society manifests itself and this is the '*commodity*'. I analyse it, and right from the beginning in the *form in which it appears* ⁶

Methodology was deduced from ontology, and was not an independent level of discourse, which could be manipulated at will. To change Marx's holistic methodology, without examining his ontological commitments contradicts his own understanding of the relationship between ontology and methodology. Such a manoeuvre also introduces an empiricist bias of epistemology; how we gain knowledge of the social world, over ontology; just what it is that the social world contains. Correspondingly, the first task in an assessment of the claims of the advocates of MI has to be to clarify the relationship between ontology and epistemology and the priority of ontology, and then to assess whether the ontology has the methodological, and political and ideological consequences that it is claimed to have. It will also be possible to examine the ontological commitments which are exposed by the methodological allegiances of the critics.

The second constraint on an analysis has to be an understanding of and sympathy for the historical framework within which Marx is writing. I will argue that this needs to go beyond the simple constraint of what Marx actually said, since he conceived of his own published works as forming a whole. Even if we eventually demur from this judgement, it impels us to look first for congruities and syntheses of ideas that make sense, rather than to look for what appear to be contradictions; which may often turn out just to be paradoxes.

Finally, it is worth flagging up an alternative to the interpretation examined here; that Marx has some direct responsibility for the practices of the orthodox communist movement in the twentieth century. The alternative consists not just of a refutation of such a connection and responsibility and in the intuitively plausible notion that that it was not Marx who is to blame for Stalinism, but

⁶ Marx, K., *Marginal notes on Adolph Wagner* in Carver, T., (ed.) *Texts on Method* p. 198.

Stalin.

The Three Associated Claims of MI

Any assessment of MI and its relationship to Marx and Marxism must be clear about the nature and status of the doctrine itself. I therefore distinguish between first, the analytic truth, second the ontological position, and third the explanatory claim of the MI approach. This process of distinguishing is important, because both advocates and opponents of the approach are often unclear about its status, so that the acceptability of one part of the individualist programme is taken to carry over into other theoretically discrete areas.

So first I consider the analytical proposition which Lukes⁷ calls 'Truistic Social Atomism' as what we can take as the analytically true commitment of individualism:

Societies consist of people. Groups consist of people. Institutions consist of people plus rules and roles. Rules are followed (or alternatively not followed) by people and roles are filled by people. Also there are traditions, customs, ideologies, kinship systems, languages: these are ways people act think and talk. ⁸

Secondly there lies at the heart of the MI project a metaphysical claim, the ontological claim, that societies consists only of individuals and not (also) of irreducible social, holistic, unobservable entities. There are some good reasons for adopting this position: the demands of Ockham's razor for ontological parsimony, and the apparently hard headed insistence on only the observable as existential. But what we admit into an ontology depends on what we mean by ontologically basic. This is a question discussed above, and in particular, attention was drawn to the discussion of the ontological status of forms and relations.

The third and most commonly encountered version of MI consists of its explanatory claim:

the observable individuals that make up societies, groups, institutions, rules, roles, social relationships, and forms of behaviour are the only sort of entities that should enter into an explanatory account of them and that

⁷ Lukes, S. 'Methodological Individualism Reconsidered' in *The British Journal of Sociology*, 19, 1968, pp. 119-29. Reprinted in Emmet, D., and Macintyre, A., *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis* (ed.) London, 1970.

⁸ Lukes, 'Methodological Individualism Reconsidered' in Emmet and Macintyre, *Sociological Theory and Philosophical Analysis*, p. 77.

no holistic, unobservable existents should enter into the explanatory chain.

For Elster, the main theorist to be considered here, the main claim of MI is explanatory, consisting in

the doctrine that all social phenomena - their structure and their change - are in principle explicable in ways that only involve individuals - their properties, their goals, their beliefs and their actions⁹

On the basis of the argument that explanatory claims depend on their plausibility on the ontological claims that underpin them, the discussion of the explanatory claim is reserved until after the ontological claim has been dealt with.

The Analytic Claim

Arguably, the first proponents of MI slid from an obvious analytic point about groups - that they are made up of individuals - to an explanatory strategy in which all (or for Watkins all 'rock-bottom'¹⁰) explanations had to be rooted in individuals (and for Popper, the 'logic of their situation'). So first I consider the analytical proposition which Lukes outlines; what he calls 'Truistic Social Atomism'.

This analytical truth is often referred to in order to make MI palatable. But it is not up to the job. The claim *is* analytically true; that is to say, true by virtue of the meanings of the words used. Clearly, if this claim is all there is to MI, it is trivially true, as is the case with analytical truths generally. The point here is that nothing follows from an analytical truth about either the components of the social world and their reducibility or otherwise and, especially, nothing about the preferred explanatory strategy in social theory. Its use in giving plausibility to the claims of MI to provide the best possible form of explanation in the social sciences is dependent on the assumption that the observable individuals that make up societies, groups, institutions rules, roles, social relationships, and forms of behaviour are the only sort of entities that should enter into an explanatory account of them and that no holistic, unobservable existents should enter into the explanatory chain. On this line of argument, the analytical proposition is supposed to lend support to MI construed as an explanatory approach, outlining criteria of a good explanation and advocating methodological criteria of the *best* explanations possible in social theory. But to deduce this from an analytic truth is to make a

⁹ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 5. It is worth noting at this stage, that Elster excludes relations from his definition of the possible explanatory entities to be included in MI.

¹⁰ Watkins, J. W. N., 'Historical explanation in the Social Sciences', reprinted in J. O'Neill (ed.), *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism*, (London, 1973), p. 168.

category error, since modes of explanation presuppose certain ontological commitments which cannot be resolved by analytical fiat. This has been argued above. Whilst we can accept (as uninformative) the analytic proposition, it is nevertheless necessary to address the usually unacknowledged metaphysics of the advocates of MI.

Metaphysical Holism

The ontological claim is that societies consists only of individuals and not (also) of irreducibly social, holistic, unobservable entities. The obvious candidates for such entities are social substances, composed of matter and form. The criteria for substantiveness were outlined in Chapter Three: *individuation*: to qualify as a substance an entity has to possess 'thisness', and *non-parasitism*: a substance is an entity that has an independent existence. So substances are ontologically basic; the basic forms of being; in the sense first that they are particular of existents, and second that they are the existents that all else is dependent on, but are themselves dependent on no other thing.

If we examine the two components of substances; form and matter in the social sphere, it becomes clear that neither individually will satisfy these criteria. For a relatively uncontroversial substance such as Germany, we can abstract out the national form and the individuals who make up the matter of Germany: the Germans. But the set of German people is not a reduction of Germany, since it is a set and sets notoriously do not have the identity preserving characteristic through change that a nation does; Germany remains the same nation, while one German dies and another is born. Furthermore, even couched as a counterfactual conditional, the result is the same; Germany would have remained the same Germany if it had been that there was an incremental change in its membership, even if that incremental change had not taken place. MI Marxists deny that they are reducing to the idealised Individual, in Robinsonade manner : rather, they are reducing to *individuals*. The idealised Individual, whilst a fiction, is a sortal, viewed on a social level, whereas individuals, again viewed from a social perspective, is not. But individuals do not possess the first criteria of Aristotle's demand for substantiveness that they possess a criterion of individuation. An individual obviously does, but 'individuals' are an aggregate or set and sets, notoriously, do not possess identity through change in their membership. When theorists who propose MI say that all explanation has to be couched at the level of 'individuals', they immediately beg the question of which 'individuals', exactly? A number of possible answers may be offered, all individuals, which does not get very far since no explanation in terms of all existing individuals is credible. It may be said that we only explain through the socially relevant individuals, smuggling social

properties back in. The term 'individuals' functions like a mass noun, and not like a sortal; in this way individuals behave logically like Aristotelian matter. It is in fact, useful to see how well the parallel between individuals and matter works, both to justify the programme argued for in this thesis and to undermine the programme offered by Elster.

How do forms fare when matched against the criteria of substantiveness? They clearly satisfy the first criterion, they do not, however, seem to exemplify non-parasitism, since they do depend on the individuals that make them up. It is however, plausible to argue that they do not consist of the particular individuals who make them up, since they could remain the same through identity preserving changes in the matter that forms their constituents.

Clearly in order to get to a useful notion of social substance we require both matter and form, since neither satisfies the criteria of substantiveness on their own. That is to say, we need both an account of the individuals who make up a social whole and of the nature of that social whole itself, and neither is entirely reducible to the other. Arguably Elster covertly recognises this: when he admits irreducible social relations later in *Making Sense of Marx*.¹¹

Social existents and their relations

It will be helpful now to outline a catalogue of social existents whose irreducibility might be doubted by advocates of MI; or in other words, to outline the sorts of contentious entities we are concerned with. These are (exhaustively) social substances, social types, social processes, social states, social events, social forms, and social matter. Examples of each might be as follows: of social substances; Glasgow, (but not its territory), or the National Union of Miners; of social types; Capitalism, or Bureaucracy; of social properties; employer, or research student; of social processes; the decline of the Roman Empire, accumulation of capital, or the decay of capitalism; of social states; the sexual division of labour, or class antagonism; and of social events; the fall of the Berlin Wall, or the assassination of President Kennedy.¹²

There is an important further qualification that needs to be added to the concept of social types. This term, more usually associated with Weber, does however express something of what Marx means when he refers to a society as capitalist. He takes it that he is referring to a group of real relationships that constitute the mechanisms that explain the operation of the society. In contrast, for Weber, ideal

¹¹ Elster *Making Sense of Marx* pp. 94-95.

¹² This is an amended version of the typology in Ruben *Metaphysics of the Social World* pp. 8-9

types are one sided exaggerations, constructed by the social scientist to form a conceptual whole, and to generate useful hypotheses about the social world. In other words, for Marx types are reflective of the real mechanisms in a society, whereas for Weber, ideal types are conceptual abstractions.

Social matter and social form fit in, as we have seen by being component elements of social substances. Social forms have the peculiar property that they are immaterial but spatially located.

To further expand on this typology we need to examine the relations between each of these elements. In terms of the relations of priority between them social substances and social types on the Marx rather than the Weberian reading of them involve social forms and sub-forms. Social forms are either imposed or immanent;¹³ immanent if they are implicit in the matter they enform, imposed if they are alien to the matter they enform. Admitting social types into a social ontology entails rejecting methodological individualism because of the failure of reductive materialism to cope with the type token distinction, that is, because types, which are explanatory, are differently instantiated.

Social properties present a pivotal area in the discussion of MI and Marxism, since they include as a subset, the category of relations, which reflects back on the existence of social wholes. Some properties, such as being red, are not relational, but most, and the most interesting properties cannot exist in a universe in which there is only one thing and that thing is the predicate of the property in question. That is to say:

A property P is non relational iff it is logically possible for there to be a universe in which there is some object O and O is P, and no other object exists.¹⁴

Social properties are therefore all relational and constitute and are derived from forms and sub forms. Social substances and social types consist of groups, not sets of relations, though; identity of a form is preserved through a range of changes in social relations. This allows us to map out the terrain of social theory

¹³ cf. Elster's distinction between teleology (the intentional actions of social agents) and teleonomy (objective teleology): in 'Marxism, Functionalism and Game Theory' in *Theory and Society* 11 (1982) pp. 453-82. The distinction mirrors that of imposed and immanent form but - in empiricist style - rejects the possibility of immanent form and Marx's philosophical anthropology which subtends his version of this distinction. This motivates Elster's rejection of Marx's 'speculative theory of history' Elster *Making Sense of Marx* pp. 108-109

¹⁴ Ruben *Metaphysics of the Social World* p. 24.

itself, since social theory asks what range of social relations can a society change through, while still being classifiable as a particular type of society. These social relations these relations are neither entirely external¹⁵ nor internal¹⁶ Social theory asks ‘what relations are internal and what relations are external?’ This question poses a demand for criteria of individuation both over time and between discrete causally potent entities, satisfied by:

Social processes are the characteristic modes of behaviour of social forms and the individuating characteristic of social forms.

Social states are (partial) snapshots of social types and social substances; explanatory priority resides in the latter, if at all, since what exists at one temporal point is dependent on what exists over time

Social events are (partial) snapshot of social processes; explanatory priority resides in the latter, if at all. If they are not accidents. But, on the Aristotelian conception, both social states and social events are explicable only if they come about through necessity and not through accident

Social matter consists of the always enformed (by imposition, or immanently), ahistorical, material constituents of the social world. Matter is ontologically prior, but explanatorily secondary, to social forms.

The best examples of social substances are proper names such as Glasgow. This is because proper names act as rigid designators, as Kripke argues. On this argument we can ask what Nixon would have done, counterfactually, under certain circumstances, but not what Nixon would have been like if he had had different parents, since if he had had different parents he would not have been Nixon. Treating proper names as rigid designators allows a distinction between the essential and the inessential characteristics of the entities so named

The same considerations can be applied to social substances. It is intuitively reasonable to say that Glasgow could be moved, spatially, in certain directions. It may not be obvious what is the single essential attribute of Glasgow or the nest of essential attributes of Glasgow; whether the City Chambers would have to be moved brick by brick, and so on. Nevertheless it is certainly conceivable (and so logically possible) that we could say, after a certain period of time over which this operation was carried out, pointing to a certain section of the Clyde; that was where Glasgow used to be, and now that it has moved North. What this entails is

¹⁵ as they are for Hobbes or, arguably, for Elster

¹⁶ as they are for Ollman, Lukács, but not Rader's Hegel

that its present spatial location is not essential to Glasgow being Glasgow.

Recent history provides us with a real world example of this sort of phenomenon in the case of Germany. This is an example of a social substance that was split and then unified. Some answers can be given to questions about identity here: Did Germany cease to be *simpliciter* in 1945-8 and then come to be again in 1991? Clearly our intuitive reply would be to deny this and assert instead that Germany was split, and then reunited. But the notion of reuniting what was once split is particularly difficult to retranslate into individual terms.

It is in the case of substantial change that the reduction to a micro story is least obviously applicable and, of course, Marx is interested most in the substantial changes. Substantial sorts of questions ask, what does the unification of Germany amount to? What (substance) was re-unified? The answer cannot be a set of people, indicating that we have to describe the event under the right description if it is to be explained. Reunification presupposes a prior unity; indicating the only thing that reunification can be applied to is a thing that was once split and now is whole. It follows from the meaning of the words, that whatever aggregates can do, they cannot be unified, or reunified.

The explanatory claim

The explanatory claim made by MI is eroded by the sorts of considerations about metaphysical individualism discussed above. But even on its own terms it faces problems, first in its empiricist emphasis on the directly observable, and second in its attempt to reduce social properties into individual ones: the first claim is made most strongly by Hayek, and the second is considered and attacked by Mandelbaum.

The central claim of MI, as opposed to the ontological claim of metaphysical individualism, is couched at the level of explanation. We have already seen that Elster describes it in this way. Hayek, however insists that this does not entail a denial of the very existence of societies. According to Hayek, 'true individualism' is

primarily a *theory* of society, an attempt to understand the forces which determine the social life or man...This should by itself be sufficient to refute the silliest of the common misunderstandings: the belief that individualism postulates (or bases its arguments on the assumption of) the existence of isolated or self-contained individuals, instead of starting from men whose whole nature is determined by their existence in society.¹⁷

¹⁷ Hayek, F. A., *Individualism and the Economic Order* (London, 1949) p.6.

For Hayek, social wholes are no more than the sum of the individuals who comprise them, and since only *these* elements of wholes can be clearly perceived, social analysts must begin with them. Thus it is the observability of individuals that makes them explanatorily primary.

Hayek's central claim is that individuals are more easily observable than collectivities. This is not at all obvious since, as Lukes points out, as for example the operation of a court is directly observable (though not at least in principle directly explicable) whereas the intentions of a social agent are not. This is not surprising in view of the difficulty of escaping from such societal facts, as argued in response to the earlier advocates of MI by Mandelbaum.

Furthermore, Hayek's claim that MI expresses the simplest (that is, most easily understood) aspects of social life is equally open to counter-example. It is comparatively easy to understand a court's operation, whereas the complex motivations of a criminal are more problematic. Again, even if it were true that individuals could exist independently of institutions, the interesting features of social life often stem from the relation of individuals to collectivities. Thus we can only speak of soldiers because we can speak of armies. In this sense, an explanatory rather than an ontological sense, the significance of an individual is parasitic on collectivities. Thus Elster makes constant reference to workers, in a way that recognises some individuals are placed differently to, and differently significant from other individuals. An individual is a member of a class, of a gender group, and of an age group, as well as of many other structurally determined collectivities.

For Hayek, social wholes are no more than the sum of the individuals who comprise them, and since only *these* elements of wholes can be clearly perceived, social analysts must begin with them, for:

words like government or trade or army or knowledge do not stand for single observable things but for structures of relationships which can be described only in terms of schematic representations of 'theory' of the persistent system of relationships between the ever-changing elements. These 'wholes', in other words, do not exist for us apart from the theory by which we constitute them, apart from the mental technique by which we reconstruct the connections between the observed elements¹⁸

¹⁸ Hayek, F. A., 'Scientism and the study of Society' in O'Neill (ed.) *Modes of Individualism and Collectivism* (London, 1973), p. 60.

This argument of Hayek prefigures Kitching's point¹⁹ about the idea of production being primary in Marxist theory. Production in Marx, particularly in the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, figures as the irreducible activity of human species existence; the basis of the existence of a social whole, and the immanent form of a future post capitalist society. But, just as Kitching makes the founding of social existence on production into something subjective, so Hayek reduces social wholes to features of an inquirer's dispositions, rather than considering them as some ontological feature of the world. The approach is strongly reminiscent of the discussion of primary and secondary qualities in the debates of classical empiricism, which was itself premised on the rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics. On the interpretation argued for in this thesis, Hayek's distinction between observable individual level elements and the unobservable holistic concepts that enter in at a theoretical level is not so much wrong as inadequate. The inadequacy arises first because we only observe empirical individuals by capturing them under a previously existing, theoretically significant designation, since it would be impossible to name a new, bare particular. Instead what we observe is an entity behaving in a specific kind of way and theoretically assimilate the individual to a kind. Through this epistemological process we are able to identify it as such and such an entity, for example, a human individual rather than just a body. Is there any reason to suggest that precisely the same procedure is applicable to social wholes? To raise the question suggests something of the arbitrariness involved in prohibiting explanation couched at one particular level and insisting on its reduction to other lower levels; the arbitrariness involved in stopping at the level of individuals, rather than going down to the cells or atoms that compose them. Instead the epistemological task of identifying social phenomena as types of phenomena depends on capturing them as powerful entities. In the social world, we identify a group, a class, an institution by observing the way in which it behaves, and therefore identifying it as a certain kind of group, class, or institution with certain powers and capacities that are conferrable on its members. A capitalist, regardless of his or her intentions, is only able to act *as* a capitalist because of the existence of a class of capitalists, in turn dependent on the existence of capital and its presupposition, labour. In denying the objective existence of social wholes Hayek is logically forced to deny their causal efficacy, and to reverse the epistemological process of identifying entities according to type. Instead he views social types, which are social wholes, as mental constructs in the mind of the observer. As a result, although he avoids the more crude manifestations of individualism Hayek nevertheless denies that any phenomena are irreducibly social. His method is individualist because it starts with individual units of investigation.

Mandelbaum and the societal facts argument

In the course of outlining his anti-reductionist position, Mandelbaum makes an analogy with epiphenomenalist philosophy of mind,²⁰ in which brain states are a necessary condition for mental states (and a particular brain state is a necessary condition for a particular mental state) and so mental states are parasitic on brain states, but not reducible to them. In the same way for Mandelbaum, societal facts; that is: 'any facts concerning the forms of organisation present in a society,'²¹ are parasitic on the existence of the individuals that, in an analytic sense, compose that society. Whether Mandelbaum is right about the existence of societal facts, he does open space for consideration of the explanatory primacy of features of the world that are ontologically parasitic on other features of the world. It just does not follow that because X depends for its existence on Y that X cannot therefore explain the nature of Y. To suggest that it does is to introduce a bias of explanatory reduction.

Because of the arbitrariness of this prescription, not only is there disagreement about it there is no obvious reason why the ontological claim should be true. However, it may still be true, and Mandelbaum seeks to show that it is not. He wants to show that:

concepts involving status and role cannot themselves be reduced to a conjunction of statements in which these or other societal concepts do not appear.²²

There are three bases of this claim: first that an explanation of social action is not possible by observation on one occasion alone: a Martian could not understand the process of withdrawing money from a bank unless it was explained that it was necessary to have previously deposited money, and that a withdrawal slip could not be handed to just anyone for the desired effect. This example of Mandelbaum's indicates that recurrent observation is necessary to make social explanation possible but this seems to be more a heuristic device than a methodological one: that is, he would claim that recurrent observation may suggest an explanation which may be wrong, whereas a methodological approach which focuses on societal facts entails the correct explanation in terms of roles, status and so on. Although a recurrently observing Martian may recognise recurring features of an act he may still select the wrong ones since he only observes correlations and not

²⁰ Mandelbaum, M., 'Societal Facts' in *British Journal of Sociology* 1955 pp. 305 - 317.

²¹ Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts' p. 307.

²² Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts' p. 309.

explanations. For example he may believe that the issue of money is caused by receiving a green slip and not a red one. In short, at most he can know how to get money and not why he gets it, and, explanations consist in giving answers to why-questions. What the Martian needs is an understanding of the nature of a bank clerk *qua* bank clerk; of the nature of a bank clerk's role. Behaviour of individuals including the bank clerk is only explainable in terms of roles and an understanding of those roles by those who interact with the individuals who fill out those roles:

Each of them no less than I ...will only behave in this certain way because each recognises the teller of the bank to have a certain function. Thus the institutional aspect is not reducible to the behaviour of other people apart from the social agent in question.²³

Finally, the role of the bank clerk is not reducible to his observed behaviour towards others, because his behaviour is conditioned by his social role: he will not give you money at a party. Such an approach is plausible and that it throws much light on the debate. Furthermore, the denial of the ontological claim means that the social wholes that give rise to social roles are admissible into an ontology. Then the explanatory power of MI is weakened since it leaves something 'untranslated' and unexplained.

The consequence of this analysis is that individual level predicates have built into them salient features of the relevant social context. Indeed this is conceded by Elster who introduces social relations in the discussion of game theory, arguing that:

in the analysis of society one cannot ... begin by describing isolated individuals and then go on to define the comparative relations between them, since an (interactional relation) must be present from the outset. In the study of society, relations are prior to predicates. An empiricist methodology of social science rests on the opposite priority.²⁴

It is difficult to see how this account could be squared with the definition of MI offered by Elster and cited above. In fact, it is a methodological principle that many social holists would be happy with as a description of their own position. The assessment of Elster's highly critical work on Marx, therefore has to move on from simply outlining the deficiencies of MI as a research programme to look at the overall conception of analytical Marxism which structures Elster's approach.

²³ Mandelbaum, 'Societal Facts' p. 308.

²⁴ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 94-5.

Analytical Marxism

Jon Elster's book *Making Sense of Marx*, published in 1985, was widely received as signifying the full articulation of Analytical Marxism as a new paradigm for social theory. This paradigm is normally characterised by what it is, rather than what it is not, but the positive characteristics of the school are balanced by assumptions out of sympathy with Marx's overall project, and silences and dismissals of aspects of that project. Indeed, one of the most critical of these dismissals in Elster's work, though less apparent in Cohen, is of the claim that Marx had an overall systematising framework that generated substantial theses at all. What unites the analytical Marxists is not altogether clear at first sight. All reject the labour theory of value in its standard form, but even this is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for inclusion within the limits of the paradigm. More important both to the self image of the practitioners of Analytical Marxism, and to an objective characterisation of the approach, are matters of intellectual tone and perspective. Correspondingly an outline of the school has more to do with these properties of approach rather than the acceptance or rejection of particular substantive theses, with the caveat mentioned about system building to be considered below. This is betokened by the expressed affinity to Anglo American analytical philosophy and instanced in the search for inconsistencies in the entire set of writings by Marx. Despite the vagueness of this characterisation, it will be argued that the tone and perspective of Analytical Marxism sets up problems that it cannot overcome.

Generally, then, an analytical approach is characterised by the making of nice distinctions clearly outlined, and the 'disambiguating' of historical statements that are taken to be, and sometimes are ambiguous. Crucially the ambiguity in Marx texts is seen by Elster to stem from a dualism in modes of explanation. Specifically, at the heart of Elster's book is his view that Marx is terribly confused in his choice of method and he condemns, as indicative of this, 'Marx's constant tendency to fuse or confuse, philosophy of history and historical analysis.'²⁵

Working from this position, Elster is quick to level the charge of inconsistency at Marx, through a comparison of the explicit or implicit contents of diverse statements. Embedded in this approach is a view that statements can stand on their own without needing to be read in sympathy to the tradition from which they come (Elster has little sympathy with that tradition) or with weighting and attention to status. There is very little attention paid in *Making Sense of Marx* to questions of intellectual history. Correspondingly, letters never intended for

²⁵ Elster *Making Sense of Marx* p. 437.

publication, preparatory notebooks, polemical interventions, summaries of his own intellectual development by Marx, which may or may not be an accurate indication of how his thought developed, and the fully worked up, revised, and completed first volume of *Capital* are all treated as an equally useful source for passages that can be tested against one another for their consistency. In his critique of Marx's view of religion, for example, Elster cites texts from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, the *Deutsche-Brusseler-Zeitung* in 1847, the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, the *Grundrisse*, *Capital 1*, *Capital 3* and the third volume of *Theories of Surplus Value*. Such texts not only span three decades, but are drawn from sources widely ranging in their representative status for a commentary on the core of Marx's thought, however that core is depicted.

It is not surprising that from such an enormous resource, plenty of inconsistencies may be discovered. In this light, Cohen's constraint, which Elster also accepts, that his interpretation be consonant with 'what Marx actually said' is an evasion of the requirement to work out which of Marx's works are the most central to his system. This is a concern Marx himself shared, and he bequeathed later commentators some guidelines. Writing to Engels in 1865, Marx asserts that

whatever shortcomings [my writings] may have, they have the advantage of forming an artistic entity*, and that can be achieved only through my method of never letting them into print until I have them before me in their entirety. This is impossible by the Jacob Grimm method which is altogether more suitable for writings which are not dialectically structured.²⁶

This should caution us against taking the set of Marx works as one vast text to be tested for inconsistencies, and sensitise us to the task of discriminating the Marx *canon* from the Marx *corpus*. The way to do this is to be sensitive to questions of intellectual history, the development of themes within Marx, and to what is central and what is peripheral in his work.

It is perhaps not surprising that Elster is insensitive to the varying degrees of polish, importance and depth in Marx's work. The implications of Marx's remark are that commentators should seek out the artistic whole, and evaluate texts on the basis of their proximity to the centre of that whole. This suggests some weakly formulated conception of working out Marx's *system*, or *world view*, in order to pick out which texts are more or less canonical. But, as an approach, Analytical

²⁶ Marx to Engels 31st July 1865 in Raddatz, F. J. (ed.) and Osers, E., (trans.) *The Marx Engels Correspondence: the Personal Letters 1844-177* p. 112 *other translations have 'whole' here.

Marxism is unsympathetic to the building of systems, either philosophical, or theoretical in a more general way. This perspective itself is characteristic of the caution over system building of analytical philosophy more generally. What is more, those who are sympathetic to this system building, or theory building view of social theory, and to Marx's attempt to build one such theory, find themselves, somewhat arbitrarily left without the reconstructive tools to do the job.

One sometimes has the feeling that Elster has not only pointed out flaws in the Marx 'house', and used those flaws to knock it down, but that he stands back, daring commentators to rebuild it, but not allowing them any 'cement' to do so. Another way of putting this is to suggest that Marx's work must be judged not only on the basis of certain methodological or epistemological assumptions but also through a cognizance of the ontological commitments that Marx himself held, and by due consideration towards these.

Elster and Marx's dualism in the philosophy of history

On Elster's view much of Marx's work is fatally spoilt by his 'inherent lack of intellectual discipline' and by its source in a 'strangely disembodied' speculative, functionalist philosophy of history drawn from Hegel. But at other times, Elster's Marx can be insightful. This happens when he abandons speculation for the techniques associated with methodological individualism. Thus *Making Sense of Marx* is really a book with two different purposes. The first is indicated by the title; to make sense of Marx's nonsense by showing what is coherent and what is confused in the whole of Marx's disparate and enormous writings by cross checking for consistency and by applying Elster's preferred methodological techniques. The second is to vindicate these techniques through their application to the problems Marx himself approached.

Despite the fact that Elster's work is structured by his account of the failings of Marx in methodology and similar failings in the philosophy of history, he gives a rather brief account of each. The methodological approach is asserted in an introductory chapter and when he focusses directly on the philosophy of history it is to give a statement of his own position and a handful of examples which are alleged to bear out his claims. Looking at the general claim on the history of philosophy first: According to Elster, Marx is 'imprisoned in a half way house, between a fully religious and a fully secular view of history', where he stays with, and largely thanks to the influence of, Hegel.²⁷ The religious component of this view has its roots in Leibniz's 'secular theodicy', which was dependent on the view

²⁷ This view clearly has affinities with conventional interpretations of Marx such as those provided by Kolakowski and Popper

that history has both a goal and a creator. As Hegel's philosophy of history partakes in this but aims to give the theodicy a secular twist it 'is nonsense.' To the extent that Marx indulges in the same idea that history has a goal but fails to indicate the intentional agent whose intentions are guided by that goal, his own programme and method exhibit the same vacuousness and incoherence.

In the earlier discussions contained in *Theory and Society* Elster draws out a distinction between objective and subjective teleology in social reasoning, and in the same manner accepts the second; the teleology involved in the intentional acts of individuals and rejects the latter. This distinction rests however, on the wider distinction between which actors in the social world can be considered to be subjects. Thus functionalist accounts of the state, of classes, and of the development of man conceived as a species are outlawed on the basis of the theoretically unstable nature, collapsible and likely to collapse in the absence of micro foundations, or on the basis of the vacuousness of the claims that these sorts of entities are subjects. Only intentional teleology is permitted, and all holistic explanation is conceived of as a temporary, shorthand explanation until a 'micro-story' can be written which provides a rock bottom explanation. In the light of the methodological imperative to avoid false explanations, by shortening the time lag between explanans and explanandum, this amounts to a requirement for day to day explanations of historical events rather than an overarching theoretical interpretation whose referents are supra-individual social wholes. In particular explanations that refer to the needs of the system are seen to be, at best over-generalised accounts and at worst, wishful thinking.

But the Aristotelian ontology that Marx used works on a different conception of teleology, according to which substantial entities have natures which they express, and according to which they can be judged to be more or less adequate examples of the sort of thing that they are. This conclusion is drawn from both the account Wiggins gives of the nomological nature of natural kinds and the sorts of considerations about individuation that are bound up in it. On this view, a teleological conception of the social world is required, firstly to identify the entities that exist in that world, through the process of sweeping back from observed behaviour to discover the essential qualities of the furniture of the social world. Not only does this picture fit with the conception of human potentiality that Marx elucidates in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, but it also explains the conceptions of the production of commodities, subject to decay when not worked up or consumed that Marx outlines in the *Grundrisse*. In this sense the associated categories of potential, actual, form, matter, essence and appearance make up a thread which runs through the Marx corpus.

One example of this is the conception Marx has of capital as a social relation. As we saw above, in the context of a discussion of the distinction between the formal and material properties of the social world, Marx argues that capital is not a thing, but:

it is a definite social relation of production pertaining to a definite historical social formation, which is simply takes the form of a thing and gives this thing a specific social character. Capital is not the sum of the material and produced means of production. Capital is the means of production as transformed into capital, these being no more capital than gold or silver are money. ²⁸

What therefore *counts* as capital depends on how the means of production behaves, and is irreducible to the properties of the 'bare' means of production considered outside of their specific historical social form. Capital therefore is identified by various different characteristic forms of behaviour which the means of production exhibit only under these overarching social forms. Subsumed under capitalist relations, the means of production are considered *as* capital. Bare means of production contain the potential to be capital and that potential is actualised as the means of production are first formally and then really made to fit with the dominant social relations, whose emergence is conditional on the emergence of landless labourers and so on. Once they are so subsumed, they behave in certain specific and theoretically specifiable ways. It is unnecessary then to vindicate the ontological and epistemological procedures involved here on the basis that Marx accurately drew out the ways in which capital would actually behave; in terms of the tendency of the rate of profit to fall and so on. Rather, this is a secondary problem, with its own difficulties, at some distance from capturing the nature of the entity: thing or relation, which the word capital picks out. In writing a history of capital rather than a history of the technical development of production techniques, Marx exhibits his commitment to a historical, supra-individual ontology in which capital exists as a distinct category. This sense in which Marx has a historical and not a supra historical ontology cannot be captured by a method that takes as its building blocks bare individuals. The removal of conceptions of social forms which make the furniture of the world into constructs specific to particular epochs leaves out the very forms of behaviour which go on to make means of production *capital*.

²⁸ Marx, *Capital 3* trans. D. Fernbach, intro. E. Mandel (Harmondsworth, 1981) p. 953.

Elster considers such investigations into the inner necessity of political economic categories as a 'quasi-deductive method'; which (after, but without acknowledgement to, Bohm-Bawerk in *Karl Marx and the Close of his System*) he calls dialectical deduction. On this he pours scorn - it is 'barely intelligible', 'dazzlingly obscure' and a 'conceptual sleight of hand'²⁹ and at the root of this characterisation is his rejection of Aristotelian potentialities which was first raised in *Logic and Society*:

I do not advocate an Aristotelian conception of potentialities; possibilities are not shadowy entities that hover between non existence and existence and exercise some kind of causal influence on the actual. Possible worlds are not out there awaiting further inspection.³⁰

His gloss is that instead of using dialectical deduction to explain the emergence of the reinvestment motive in early capitalism we must look at the motives of individual economic agents. But this begs the question: why did those economic agents have those motives? Any explanation of motivation in Marx studies has to be cognisant of what Marx says about the socially determined nature of the interests that agents bring to the market place, as argued above, and thus the ways in which wider social forces, entities, and processes set up or close down on the courses of action that individuals can take. Such explanations are, necessarily, supra individual.

Theodicy and methodology in social theory

If we return to the intellectual concerns of Elster's account of Marx's theory of history, it can be shown that the broad treatment of its roots in Hegel and Leibniz does not warrant the strength of the methodological commitments that Elster traces through his reading of particular issue, since it amounts to a conflation of several separable issues. There are, for example, some obvious problems in imputing to Marx a similar sort of speculative theory to Leibniz, apart from simply showing that particular views of history were reflective of different historical conditions. For there is certainly a case to be made that the Enlightenment thinkers associated with the atomistic view that counters those of Hegel, Leibniz and Marx, were equally likely to run to God for justification of their social and political viewpoints:

For Locke, individual rights were a matter of each persons being the workmanship and property of God which meant that 'we were made to last

²⁹ Elster *Making Sense of Marx* pp. 37-39

³⁰ Elster *Logic and Society* p. 7

during His not one another's pleasure'. Each was responsible for himself and his destiny in a way that no given social relation could mediate and this was the basis of the requirement of individual consent to be governed, which when elaborated across a whole society added up to the a theory of the social contract. Locke's radical position was that [governing arrangements against the will of people] did violence to the status of the individual as God's property by treating him as though his own responsibility for himself did not matter.Whether anything like the Lockean view can work once God is removed from the picture is another question.³¹

The greatest social atomist of them all, Thomas Hobbes, who points us towards consideration of 'men as if but even now sprung out of the earth , and suddenly like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kinds of engagement each other.'³² is often interpreted in a secular way, but is revealed in a recent study as a profoundly religious thinker.³³

Is Elster then partaking of a religious philosophy of History in his imprecations for a (Calvinist?) methodological individualism? The charge would be an outrageous conflation of secular social methodological and ontological positions and the religiosity that formed the back drop to the intellectual life of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century. Both a broadly drawn teleological view of history, and a broadly drawn focus on the individual, served to indicate the repository of God's will in competing theological conceptions of man's place in the world. To project such concerns into Elster's position would be to do him as great an injustice as he does to Marx. Instead of such swipes it is more useful to look at the focal point of dispute between Elster and an Aristotelian Marx: the notions of the clash between human potential and the social form as the motor of history. Does this involve a theodicy?

Two controversies reported above will make it clearer; First, referring back to the discussion of Marx's doctoral dissertation, gives an indication of the extent to which Marx's thought was radical, human centred and teleological form the very first. These features are prominent for example in the argument over the existence of heavenly bodies, its 'I hate the pack of Gods' animus, and the

³¹ Waldron, J., *By the Roots* review of the Anatomy of anti-liberalism by Stephen Homes in London Review of Books (February 1995).

³² Hobbes, T., in *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes* ed. Sir William (London, 1839) ii, p. 103

³³ Martinich, A. P., *The Two Gods of Leviathan; Thomas Hobbes on Religion and Politics* Cambridge 1992 reviewed in *History of Political Thought* 1992 pp. 329 - 334

Epicurean, teleological, denial of the existence of the heavenly bodies to satisfy the needs of the self-conscious human subject.

Second it is clearly true that in Marx there exists the idea that there is a collective actor; humanity, conceived of as a species. This idea takes its strength from the considerations over identifying natural kinds that was discussed in an earlier chapter. To identify a thing as belonging to a species is to identify it as behaving in certain law-like ways, not to separate a species member and then to see how it behaves. On the Aristotelian model that Marx worked with, there is an imperative to look at species behaviour, before considering the behaviour of the particular, and of course, Marx's concern is with the human species and the types of behaviour that it gets up to. Consideration of types is the driving concern of social holism and the methodological holism (which it must be said, need not be teleological) against which Elster inveighs. Types of behaviour can have different material and historical instantiations so reference has to be made in their explanation to the general and formal features of the situations in which they occur.

Elster's reconstruction of Marx's philosophical anthropology

Elster is comprehensively dismissive of Marx's work on the nature of man and regards it as one of the areas of his thought that is in large part hopelessly vitiated by his teleological conception of history. Thus his ideas on Man and nature are 'rambling and incoherent, or inherently trivial.'³⁴ He outlines the status of some of Marx's theories as 'appearing to be speculative philosophy of a kind that is now discredited.' and adds that 'some belong to the Aristotelian tradition within moral philosophy which tries to derive statements about the good life for man from an analysis of human nature.' Like many others, including those commentators who notice the ancient origins of Marx's thought, he does not consider the possibility that these two features might be related by their shared metaphysical foundations. The existence of such a link though, is clear, and absence of its working through should warn us against interpretations that acknowledge an Aristotelian basis for Marx's discrete moral view and do not carry over the discussion into the wider ramifications of that view for the metaphysics of his wider social view.

I argued above that humanity engaging in productive and creative human activity in relation to the natural world was the basis of Marx's social ontology. But this social matter has imposed on it a social form which is alien to it. The form contains the principle of persistence of the whole while the matter contains its

³⁴ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, p. 55

principle of change. This sets up a dynamic tension between the potential matter of society concentered in alienated, abstract labour and the formal and real domination of the productive process established by the forcible imposition of capitalist social relations on that matter. The requirements of unity (that allows us to speak of capitalist society as an organised whole) generate this ever present tension. That tension is both exacerbated by and reflected in the possibility of and potential for a different set of social relations. On this interpretation Marx's Aristotelian ethic and his Aristotelian ontology are united as a coherent social ontology. how does this match up to Elster's explanation? There are terminological problems; Elster rejects the idea that there is a coherent way in which Marx's thought can be described as materialist. Further more, he argues with Cohen that the appropriate antonym to matter is social rather than mental, or, we might add, formal. Since he also has rejected an Aristotelian picture of potentialities (see above) it is not likely that he could incorporate the conception of humans as potential matter without dropping the commitment to MI.

In his account of alienation then, Elster pursues a rigid distinction between objective and subjective alienation and is critical of Wood who draws together the two phenomena.³⁵ Elster accepts the possibility of the existence of objective alienation but comments:

we may be able to single out some feature of capitalism by virtue of which it ought to be abolished, and to offer an argument that a society is possible in which that feature is not found. Yet this offers no answer to the question of how the abolition is to occur, and what causal role the feature will have in the abolition if it occurs. If we condemn it capitalism by virtue of a purely objective alienation there is no reason to expect it to set up pressure on social arrangements ... Marx entertained a speculative philosophy of history that authorised him to neglect this difficulty or at least to give it less attention than it required.³⁶

Two comments are worth making. If Marx 's work amounted to selecting a feature of capitalism by virtue of which it ought to be abolished, then it would have amounted to very much less than, and be considerably shorter than, it is. He does in fact give an account of the causal mechanism by which 'objective alienation is to be abolished' in his account of and personal intervention in political activity. The point is better inverted: such accounts and such activity would not make sense unless there was some sort of driving force in a very general sense that gave them

³⁵ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* pp.74-75.

³⁶ Elster, *Making Sense of Marx* p. 76

some chance of success.

But the deeper problem in Elster's analysis is the distinction between objective and subjective alienation that he draws. Alienation after all, is primarily the alienation of human productive activity and that activity has an irreducibly subjective content since it is intentional: since man differs from the spider in directing an image of the web before he constructs the web there is no possibility of him being forever unconscious of the limits placed on intentional activity. Human productive activity *poiesis* which is the ontological condition of existence is essentially subjective

In this vein it is critically inadequate to go through *Making Sense of Marx* pointing out where Elster misreads Marx. More important is to look at the techniques that Elster himself uses and to ask whether they are appropriate to the task of Marx interpretation; or to assess the second part of the Elster project before looking at the first. I have argued above for the importance of getting Marx's ontological commitments right, and it is thus equally valid to ask about the same ontological commitments in the work of those who seek to analyse him. It might be objected that ontological commitments are too slippery to provide the basis for a serious critique of Elster's interpretation of Marx, and this would seem to be reinforced by the fact that he himself does not elaborate an ontology; his critique of Marx is sustained at an epistemological and methodological level, and not an ontological one. Is it then, a distortion of Elster to direct fire at what is at best only half explicit in his work? The reasons for having an ontological focus are, in short, that ontological positions throw up different epistemological questions. Methodological individualism has at least two ontological commitments embedded in it; that there are no supra-individual entities that are causally effective, and that reducing the time lag is essential for generating the best explanations. This second relies on a Humean account of causation that foregrounds temporal contiguity as a desideratum of explanation. As argued above, it is a question of ontological choice that, at least in part determines what *sort* of questions we should ask of a theory, what sort of substantive theses count as a good answer, and consequently, what methodological approach is appropriate to that theory.

Elster does not entirely exclude the notion of social contradiction however and he discusses two types of social contradiction discussed in *Logic and Society*, counterfinality and sub-optimality. Counterfinality is the idea that uncoordinated actions may come to grief through the mechanism of unintended consequences. By contrast, sub-optimality involves the intentional production of sub-optimal consequences by social actors, and here the paradigm is the prisoners dilemma.

In *Radical Philosophy*, Joseph McCarney says that:

The contrast lies in the fact that, while sub-optimality is a game theoretic notion presupposing strategic rationality on the part of the players, counter finality can arise only at a pre-strategic, pre-game theoretic stage. This stage is for Elster the true home of Marx's methodological expertise.³⁷

But in an earlier piece in *Inquiry*³⁸ Elster suggests that the divide between counter finality and sub-optimality is the divide between traditional and modern societies, a contention that has the unfortunate consequence that Marx's chief theoretical advance is useless for understanding capitalism:

While Marx's methodological contribution may be of use to the anthropologist or ancient historian, it can have little to offer the student of capitalism³⁹

If it is accepted, as has been argued, that different explanatory strategies are applicable at different times within the development of one specified social entity, because of its development through different phases, then even more so will explanatory strategies differ across historical epochs, so there can be no objection to Elster's strategy on that basis. But it is a little perverse that Marx's central insight appears to be inapplicable to his central theoretical object; capitalism. Elster's Marx is a man who got things very, very wrong, and his body of work would then be in a worse state than even Elster seems to think here about the different explanatory strategies offered in different social epochs.

Elster, Marx, and Stalin

The teleological conception of history that is the besetting sin of Elster's Marx is alleged to be deeply implicated in the practice of Stalinism. It is worth looking closely at how Elster attempts to carry this off. He says that Marx in his own words felt forced to:

say to the workers and the petty bourgeois: it is better to suffer in modern bourgeois society which by its industry creates the material means for the foundation of a new society that will liberate you all than to revert to a bygone form of society which, on the pretext of saving your classes thrust

³⁷ McCarney, J., 'Analytical Marxism: a new Paradigm?' in *Radical Philosophy* 43

³⁸ Elster, *Inquiry* 23 pp. 216-7

³⁹ McCarney, J., 'Analytical Marxism: a new Paradigm?' in *Radical Philosophy* 43

the entire nation back into mediaeval barbarism.⁴⁰

Elster's gloss on this passage is that if you 'substitute the peasantry for the petty bourgeoisie, and primitive socialist accumulation for modern bourgeois society, and you have the classic justification for Stalinism'⁴¹ So the liquidation of the Kulaks, the show trials, the Gulags and all the panoply of Stalinist repression are traceable from Marx's speculative philosophy of history.

Such an account makes one want to pause for breath. One problem with it is that it seems to violate Elster's own methodological positions, since the substitutions involved are of classes as collectivities – actors and social forms, the sort of collective entities that Elster's methodological individualism rules out of court. This is perhaps the root of his formalistic substitution. If classes, as such, do not really exist in a way that is reducible to individual actors, then we are more entitled to play fast and loose with them, substituting different collectivities and social forms here and there and seeing what happens. If talk of classes and social forms is only shorthand, simplifications designed for pragmatic instrumental political effect then we need not be too careful about their use. If however, we follow Marx in saying that the peasantry and the petty bourgeoisie are not the same sorts of thing, and neither are primitive socialist accumulation and modern bourgeois society, that they are processes and substances with their own characteristic forms of behaviour, then Marx can hardly be blamed for producing statements which can have their entire meaning changed by a little judicious substitution. It is worth adding that, in contrast to the political practitioners of Stalinism, Marx was not in a position to do any more than persuade this audience that a course of action was in their interests, and that Stalinism worked slightly differently: just a little more emphasis was placed on coercion.

Siding with the opponents of those who propose the adoption of MI into debates about Marx and Marxism is not a very surprising manoeuvre. What is significant is the way in which this position is argued. In this chapter I have examined the case put forward by Elster, in order to show some of its metaphysical shortcomings, and it is on the ontological plane that the correspondence to the hard core of Marx's project is to be discovered. It is not the case, as Lukács has famously argued that orthodoxy in Marxism consist only in matters of method; there are substantive positions which also are an essential part of the Marxian perspective. But there are ontological positions involved too, and these are displaced by MI. In different hands, MI offers a kill (Popper, Hayek and Watkins)

⁴⁰ Marx *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* 22.1.1849, cited in Elster *Making Sense of Marx* pp. 116-117

⁴¹ Elster: *Making Sense of Marx* p. 117

or cure (Elster and Roemer) solution to what a diagnosis as the problems within Marxism. The earlier theorists have the advantage of thorough going political and ideological opposition to Marxism. It is tempting to argue, somewhat cheekily to the Elster wing of the MI offensive; that the cure may work at the expense of the death of the patient.

There are other areas where ontological problems have led to political ones. One such forms the subject of the last chapter which looks at Lukács' *Social Ontology of Being*.

CHAPTER NINEMARXISM AND TOTALITY: LUKÁCS' SOCIAL ONTOLOGYIntroduction

One token of the relative lack of attention to questions of ontology amongst those interested in the high theory of Marx (compared to, for example, Marx's economics, or his theory of history) is the lack of attention paid to the work of Georg Lukács on this subject. Lukács has a plausible claim to be the most celebrated and well known of Marxist philosophers this century, and yet his last major work *Zur Ontologie des Gesellschaftlichen Seins* (*The Ontology of Social Being*¹), has been chronically under researched. It has not been published in a full English translation, perhaps because when it has been examined the assessments have usually been critical. But some of these criticisms are misplaced. In attempting to articulate a reaction to, and auto-critique of his earlier idealism, as expressed in *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács grapples with the interpretative possibilities brought out by Marx's relationship to Hegel and the revolutionary intellectual innovations that came from Marx's integration of Hegelian ideas. In the course of this he outlines a conception of Marx's own position that ends up, in some respects, not very far removed from the interpretation of Marx outlined above.² Nonetheless, Lukács' study has not been the object of sustained critical review.

In the following treatment, however, a critical distance from Lukács is constructed, distinguishing Marx's Aristotelian social ontology from the version provided by Lukács. The argument proceeds in a similar manner to the previous chapter, outlining the divergences between Marx's view, as here interpreted, and the rewriting of Marx's central assumptions implicit in the reconstruction attempted by Elster. The examination of Elster's account is much the easier task, since it is largely sufficient to bring to light Marx's own commitments and intellectual history and then to compare these commitments and history to those of the analytical Marxists, in order to show the radical discontinuity and discongruence between the two. By contrast, Lukács tends to fall on the right side

¹ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* (London, 1978) translated by David Fernbach in three volumes: 1. *Hegel*, 2. *Marx*, 3. *Labour*.

² Only three chapters of the work have been produced in translation, though they represent the most significant parts of the complete work. What is missing is the first two sections of Part One, on Neopositivism and existentialism, and on Nikolai Hartmann, respectively, and the last three sections of Part two, on Reproduction, Ideology and Alienation. There is however, quite enough reproduced to allow a critical judgement to be made. Here I follow Parkinson who suggests that 'in discussing these chapters we may be confident that we shall meet the central ideas of the *Ontology of Social Existence*' Parkinson, G.H.R., *Lukács* (London, 1977)

in many of the serious methodological debates over Marx. For example, in specifying his own ontological positions, Lukács' opposition to methodological individualism is complete, and admirably straightforward.

Nonetheless, I want to argue that his reading is still inadequate and fails to reproduce the dynamism and realism that exist in the conception of social ontology used by Marx. The Hegelian influence is manifested in the language and concepts favoured as propaedeutic devices in the *Ontology* which stand in clear contrast to the almost complete absence or dismissal of such terminology in the work of the analytical Marxists. This renders Lukács' work, especially the first volume, somewhat impenetrable, although it simultaneously reorientates the discussion in something like the right direction. But at root the problems in the design and practice of his work stem from Lukács failure to integrate Aristotelian ontological lessons into his redrawing of Marx's ontology fully and adequately. This has the unfortunate politico-theoretic consequence of exacerbating the tendency to over-totalisation in Marxist writing. This failing on a philosophical level was intermingled with a political and ideological commitment: Lukács uncritical acceptance of the doctrine of socialism in one country.

Lukács' Ontology of Social Being

Lukács' concentration on ontology dates from the end of 1964³ and lasted up to his death in 1972. It emerged from his desire to follow the *Specificity of the Aesthetic* with a comprehensive account of ethics from a Marxist standpoint. However, he rapidly became convinced that such an ethics would be an impossible project without an ontology with which to pin it down; a conviction summed up in his aphorism: 'no ethics without ontology' and his belief in 'the impossibility of positing an ethics without also positing a world-situation'⁴.

The work is divided into two halves, each of four chapters; the *Present Situation*, a survey of philosophical schools which looks at *Neopositivism and Existentialism*, and the work of *Nikolai Hartmann*, before going on to discuss first *Hegel* and then *Marx*. The second section is headed *The Most Important Problems*, the first of which is *Labour* but which also goes on to cover *Reproduction, Ideas and Ideology*, and *Alienation*. The *Ontology* as a whole offers an account of Marx's social ontology and its roots in Hegel and Aristotle. Because of its recognition of these intellectual roots it gives an account which is more well founded than the minimal account of Marx's social ontology offered by Elster, since it proceeds from a clearer

³ See the letters to Ernst Fischer of May 10 1960 and the notes 'Kleine Notizen zur Ethik' 67, cited in Tertulian, 'Lukács' Ontology'. in Rockmore et al. *Lukács Today: Essays in Marxist Philosophy* (Lancaster, 1988).

⁴ cited in Tertulian, N., 'Lukács' Ontology'

relationship to, and understanding of the philosophical traditions implicated in Marx's own account. But this is more than a comparison on the same plane, since the approach to historical questions in the interpretation of Marx differs considerably.

Perhaps the most important methodological divide between Lukács and the methodological individualist Marxists such as Elster, lies in Lukács acceptance of the Hegelian idea that there are no 'bare' philosophical concepts, rather, that such concepts gain meanings from their particular historical use. The implication of this is that there are no firm divisions between a discipline called philosophy and another called the history of philosophy, and that, to the extent that such divisions are constructed, both areas are spoiled. Thus to do work in philosophy is to do work in the history of philosophy at the same time. Marx's categories are not the product of a virgin birth, to be taken simply at face value, but resonate with the meaning and use imparted to them from the classical world, amongst other influences. This is something the analytical Marxists have very largely missed, because of the analytical demand to dissect the language used by philosophers into simple statements. Lukács, to his credit, is so imbued with this dialectical consideration of philosophical terms that he barely considers the alternatives to an account of the development of conceptual ideas, as well as of their content.

In the conversations that Lukács took part in with Holz, Kofler, and Abendroth, he argues for an ontological focus because:

if I want to understand phenomena genetically, then the path of ontology is completely unavoidable, and the problem is to pick out, in the midst of many contingencies which accompany the genesis of any phenomenon, the typical moments, those necessary for the process itself. That is certainly the basic reason why I regard the ontological question as the essential one; from an ontological point of view, the precise boundaries drawn between the sciences play a secondary role.⁵

Not only is the Marxian imperative to understand phenomena *genetically* a determinant of an ontological focus, but Lukács derives the categories of obligation (*Sollen*) and value (*Wert*) from his discussion of labour as the definitive element social ontology. A full account of these concepts would be found in the *Ethics* Lukács never lived to write. But there can be little doubt that the discussion of labour in the *Ontology of Social Being* gives the basis for their derivation. Within his social ontology, teleology is the essence of labour, and this

⁵ Pinkus, T., (ed.), *Conversations with Lukács* (London, 1974) p. 16

positing of an end which makes sense of the activity involved in labour bridges the gap between 'is' and 'ought', by discriminating between means and alternatives that would be better, or worse, at bringing the posited end about. Lukács argues that:

the immediate determining moment of every action that is intended as a realisation must be obligation, since every step of the realisation is determined by whether and how it furthers the achievement of the goal.⁶

So ought is deduced from is, at least in the sphere of means, as opposed to ends. There are certain things we ought, and ought not, to do in realising a specified goal, and so the category of obligation, so essential to ethics, is derived from consideration of the foundation of social practice: labour. By structuring his thought in this way, Lukács showed that, in his view, the relationship between political economy and ethics was mediated through a social ontology.⁷ Consequently Lukács' position fits ill with the separation of a political economy based on labour on one side and on the other, the discrete inquiry into ethics that is a characteristic of the recent interest in Marx's thought. What is more, in his discussion of the Introduction to the *Grundrisse* Lukács clearly places labour as the central category of his social ontology, going so far as to say that 'It is a commonplace that the Marxist ontology of social being assigns priority to production'⁸

For Lukács, whilst labour is the irreducible model for all social practice, it also constitutes the defining element that make the social sphere *social* at all:

with labour ... in comparison with the preceding forms of being, the inorganic and the organic we have a qualitatively new category in the ontology of social being. In nature there are only actualities, and an uninterrupted change in their existing concrete forms. It is precisely the Marxian theory of labour as the sole existing form of a teleologically produced existence that

⁶ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* 3. *Labour* p. 82 cited in Parkinson p. 194.

⁷ This fits easily with the conceptions drawn up earlier in this thesis that make the same connection; of social matter as potential matter, in the form of alienated labour, that is in conflict with the form given by the dominant set of social relations under which the constitutive productive activity of capitalism is subsumed. On this model, the unleashing of human potential, conceived as Marx's ethical goal, is integrated with the account of the crisis ridden and contradictory nature of capitalism. Marx's ethic and his critique of capitalism are integrated through the model of Aristotelian hylomorphism, and so ontology becomes the essential underpinning to ethical, as well as social enquiry.

⁸ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* p. 59 Marx

founds for the first time *the specificity of social being*.⁹

Whilst there is some truth in this depiction of Marx's structuring concepts, and it in line with the overall Aristotelian conception of Marx, Lukács nevertheless rejects what he sees as over-strained attempts to assimilate the entire scope of ontology to Aristotle, and incorporates a critique of Aristotle into the *Ontology*.

Lukács' critique of Aristotelian teleology

While he incorporates the Aristotelian category of *dunamis* into his social ontology, Lukács is critical of any attempts to work with a non-human teleology, seeing such attempts as theological, and he is critical of Aristotle and Hegel in so far as they do just this. Indeed the history of philosophy is pushed, rather schematically, into three camps; the theological exponents of a universal teleology, the denial of teleology by pre-Marxist materialists and the successful resolution of the conflict between teleology and causality by Marx himself;

Every philosophy with a theological orientation needs to proclaim the superiority of teleology over causality in order to bring its god into mental agreement with the cosmos and the world of man. Even if god simply winds up the clock to set the system in motion, this hierarchy of creator and creation is unavoidable, and with it the associated priority of the teleological positing. Every pre-Marxist materialism, ... denying the transcendent creation of the world had also to challenge the possibility of a really effective teleology. ... But once teleology is recognised, as by Marx, as a really effective category, *exclusive to labour*, the concrete real and necessary coexistence of causality and teleology inexorably follows.¹⁰

Lukács shows here that he shares the standard view of the place of teleology in Aristotle's system; as an overarching cosmological principle. It functions as a principle that always entails the existence of a subjective agent in order to set the teleological process in motion. As a result of this reading, Lukács condemns the way that:

the teleological positing is not confined to labour, (or in the expanded but justifiable sense to human practice in general) but is rather erected into a general cosmological category, thus giving rise to a persistent relationship of competition, an irresolvable antimony between causality and teleology such as has marked the entire history of philosophy...Aristotle's... system

⁹ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* 3, Labour p. 20

¹⁰ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* 3, Labour p. 9-10.

ascribes a decisive role to an objective teleology of reality... Hegel... made teleology into the motor of history and hence of his total world view. This antithesis pervades the entire history of thought and the religions, from the beginning of philosophy through to Leibniz's pre-established harmony.¹¹

and asserts, by way of contrast, the programmatic claim that;

it is clear from Marx's attitude toward Darwin and self evident for anyone familiar with his thought that Marx denied the existence of any kind of teleology outside of labour (human practice)¹²

This claim is, of course, highly contestable. It has been shown that Marx's thought is imbued with teleological accounts that go well beyond the scope of single acts of labour;¹³ what Meikle, Elster and Cohen would disagree about is not whether these accounts are present in Marx but whether they are sustainable and intellectually respectable. Why then did Lukács take such a peculiar line in denying the presence of wide ranging teleological explanations in Marx?

The answer lies in his wish to avoid committing Marx to the use of teleology as a universal cosmological principle, and the belief that this was just how teleology functioned in Aristotle. This indeed was the standard interpretation and Lukács' understanding of this feature of Aristotle's thought clearly has its roots in his study of Hartmann, whom he admires as the only non Marxist philosopher to take dialectics seriously. Lukács takes from Hartmann the interpretation of Aristotle's teleology as a universal cosmological principle, structuring a world which is only subject to disturbance as an afterthought. Hartmann had argued that:

there are also external conditions which can hinder realisation ... [of final ends] They constitute a sort of foreign body within Aristotle's world picture, an imperfection, something 'fortuitous', whose origins cannot be indicated through any of the officially authorised channels.¹⁴

But is it the case that for Aristotle teleology is erected into a general cosmological category? It is certainly true that the Scholastic, Christian and anti-scientific thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition held such a point of view, but this is perhaps

¹¹ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being*; 3, Labour p. 4.

¹² Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* 3, Labour p. 8.

¹³ See, in their own ways, Meikle, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*; Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*; and Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*

¹⁴ Hartmann, N., *Kleinere Schriften II* (Berlin, 1957), p. 86, cited in Wieland.

attributable to what Wieland calls 'their blind and often naive trust in authority which shaped their wholesale rejection of the new scientific outlook.'¹⁵ But Hartmann's conflation of this position with that of Aristotle is flawed. As Wieland argues in 'The Problem of Teleology'¹⁶, Hartmann's view of teleology as the universal and supreme principle of Aristotle's *Physics* is mistaken.

In contrast, Wieland asserts that, far from being purpose providing a universal principle, with chance as a foreign body, '*the fact is that Aristotle's theory of teleology cannot be understood properly unless it is taken to presuppose his doctrine of chance.*'¹⁷ On this interpretation, chance is depicted as indicative of an 'as if teleology, in that an event that occurred by chance could have occurred for the sake of an end. Aristotle argues that chance is the cause only of what nature too could be the cause: 'Spontaneity and chance are causes of effects which though they might result from intelligence or nature, have in fact been caused by something incidentally'¹⁸

Far from being a theologically inspired and universal principle, Aristotle's concept of teleology functions as a way of investigating the existents in a relatively well ordered world. Wieland offers a new interpretation of Aristotle in which natural teleology does not follow from the existence of God (or vice versa: the Argument from Design) but rather consists of a way of making sense of the natural world and the way in which we refer to it:

when we speak of art and nature we employ the same linguistic structures, without thereby having the right to transfer the whole content of characterisations made in one sphere to the other. In both cases we make assertions about changes primarily from the point of view of their outcomes. When Aristotle argues his doctrine of natural teleology, he is only drawing the consequences of this fact; if we want to do justice to the order in nature we *have* to consider its processes from the point of view of their results in science too, and we can only reason from results to their necessary conditions, for the opposite way does not lead to any fruitful conclusions: chance and goal-directedness constitute exhaustive alternatives. Thus Aristotle's doctrine of teleology is grounded in experience throughout and aims only at serving the interpretation of experience: a

¹⁵ Wieland, W., 'The Problem of Teleology', in *Articles on Aristotle* vol. One ed. Barnes Schofield and Sorabji, (London, 1975), p. 256.

¹⁶ Wieland, W., 'The Problem of Teleology'

¹⁷ Wieland, W., 'The Problem of Teleology' p. 143.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Physics* 198a 5-7

theological foundation for teleology is no longer a prerequisite.¹⁹

Aristotle's teleology is not the unfolding of a grand plan of an unmoved mover, but a methodological device founded on the retrospective nature of explanation. The fact that the two options for explanation are chance and goal directedness means that any explanation of a relatively well ordered system has to start from the fact of its relatively well orderedness. In social theory, the need for teleological explanations is a product of the regularities that are observable in social systems; the need to do justice to the relatively well ordered nature of the social world. This licences us to explain them as social systems of a specific sort, and to perform the same act of retrojection from consequences to necessary conditions. Teleology functions here not as a universal cosmological principle but as a way of explaining the nature of social existence, and a methodological approach which, *pace* Lukács, Marx clearly employed.

It is striking that Lukács finds the same catalogue of sins committed in the philosophical past as Elster. For Elster, Marx's work is vitiated by a speculative theory of history, a theodicy without a God, drawn by Marx from Hegel and Leibniz. This which implicates him in Stalinism, by considering pre-communist human beings as so many lambs, condemned by a speculative theory of history, to the slaughter. Elster argues that Marx commits this sin of incorporating a theodicy into his thought; Lukács, grandly, though slightly incoherently, that he liberates the history of philosophy (no less) from it. Lukács of, course, would exempt Marx from the accusation of complicity in Stalinism, but his work still exhibits confusion on the methodological issues in social theory, because there is a tension in his thought over the place that should be given to human intentionality in the explanation of action. The logic of his position on teleology should lead him to reject a teleological explanation of supra- individual collectivities, but he tends not to demand micro explanations, instead asserting the explanatory importance of the totality.

There are two distinct issues involved here. Whether Marx incorporates a 'blind' teleology into his thought is an interpretative question, and most of the evidence points to Elster being right against Lukács. Marx's work is teleological, and so much the better for it. Whether blind teleology is speculative and theological is the substantive issue. Both Elster and Lukács agree that it is. But this question demands a more thorough assessment of just what it is that the teleology in Aristotle's metaphysics amounts to.

¹⁹ Wieland, 'The Problem of Teleology' p. 160.

Lukács asserts that the characteristically Aristotelian mode of explanation: teleology, is appropriate to the social sphere but not to the inorganic or organic world that (ontologically as well as historically) precedes it. In contrast, many social theorists are much happier to allow teleology into the organic world, where the existence of feedback mechanisms within biological organisms tends to guarantee explanations of phenomena that occur 'for the sake of' other phenomena. The thrust of Elster's attack is to oppose any attempt to import such explanations into the large scale phenomena of the social world. The social world, is, as we have seen, sometimes analogised to the organic world just in order that teleological explanations may be given plausibility. Lukács and Elster differ, in this social arena, such that Elster is the more consistent theorist. For both writers, teleology is dependent on conscious intention and thus confined to the sphere of human practice. They differ in that Elster insists on methodological individualism whereas Lukács sees social mechanisms as acting behind the backs of individuals and grants macro social phenomena a *sui generis* existence. Citing Hegel's *Phenomenology* in support, he argues that:

social being - whatever it may be in itself - does actually have an existence which is independent of the individual consciousness of particular men, and has a high level of autonomously determining and determined dynamic in relation to the individual...Hence it is entirely justifiable from the standpoint of an ontology of social being, to ascribe to this totality, this dynamic and contradictory relationship of individual acts, a being *sui generis*²⁰

The claim made here is challenging and unequivocal, making a grander claim than most anti-reductionist social theorists would be happy with, and the entire account appears to run both close to Marx's view and strongly against the positions taken by methodological individualist Marxists such as Elster. But there are strains in Lukács' ontology at this point. On one hand he argues that labour is a teleological project and the model for human social practice because it involves this intentional element; on the other hand, he insists on the *sui generis* nature of social being and its independence from the individual consciousness and intentions of men. The question then arises of whether it is possible to resolve this tension in Lukács *Ontology*. The stakes are raised if we recognise that, on the face of it, in giving the central ontological role to labour, the *Ontology* is close to Marx's own account.

To make the issue clear; either there are social processes that are irreducible to the intentional actions of individuals, or there are not. Lukács holds that there are:

²⁰ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* ;1, Hegel's True and his False Ontology p. 25

Elster holds that there are not. But given that these social processes are *social*, they are to be explained, according to Lukács, teleologically. But Lukács, like Elster, rejects 'blind' or objective teleology, in his insistence on the social world as the exclusive realm of teleological explanation, against Aristotle and Hegel. If this aspect of his approach is emphasised, the position of Lukács on explanation is inclined to collapse into that of Elster, with whom he would have little sympathy, and less apparent substantive agreement. If the *sui generis* nature of the social totality is emphasised, then they appear at opposite poles. What unites them is a hostility to pre-Enlightenment forms of teleology as speculative and theological. We have already seen this in Elster's work where it acts as a motive for the adoption for methodological individualism. In Lukács, the dismissal of Aristotle's wider metaphysics leads to irresolvable tensions in the form of a dualistic ontology.

Elster distinguishes between subjective and objective teleology; the first applies to the micro-level explanation of intentional actions, the latter, illicitly, to the explanation of holistic phenomena in the social world. Lukács by contrast, argues that teleological explanation derives from the intentional nature of human labour, but human labour is the model for all other social practices and so the social sphere is amenable to teleological explanation. This social sphere where teleological explanation is applicable is very wide, embracing holistic phenomena which are *sui generis*, against methodological individualism and go on behind the backs of conscious individuals.

Aristotle applies teleological reasoning to the natural as well as the social world, but in a different form. The teleological explanation of the growth of a tree does not demand the existence of a consciousness that makes the tree grow in a specific way; it rather demands that we understand that species of tree have characteristic modes of behaviour, by which they are identified as that particular sort of tree. What is problematic for Lukács is that, if there is some scope some scope for blind teleology in the social world, he is unwilling to accord any status to the model for that explanation; the organic world. He is thus open to attack from the perspective of Elster. The root of Lukács problem is his failure to resolve the problem of individuation; since this is what provides the concept of the characteristic mode of behaviour by which the teleological structuring of the social world can be understood. Trees, and the individuable contents of the natural world are particularly open to being individuated in this way, since the nomological basis of kinds applies at its best to natural kinds. But Marx applied such a methodology to the social world as well: this is what is meant by the genetical approach and the content of the search for the special laws that govern the entities that constitute

capitalism; alienated labour, value, classes and the like. Thus it is the idea of characteristic forms of behaviour rather than that of a knowing mover that is the best criterion for according the possibility of teleological explanation. Lukács is prevented from following this path by the lack of a clear criterion for individuation within his *Ontology* stemming from the overemphasis on the notion of totality.

Internal relations and social ontology

One way in which the focus on totality has been expressed is in a development of the idealist view that deduces necessary connection from the idea of entailment. Causal interaction is seen as a real world manifestation of relations of entailment; analogous to saying, for example, that insults entail, rather than cause, annoyance. The correlative ontology to this interpretation of necessary connection is one in which every element in a complex whole is 'internally related' to every other element. However, this ontological picture poses its own problems for explanation, since it becomes impossible to isolate causally effective entities from the surrounding internally related conditions, contexts, other entities and so on. In short, it becomes impossible to individuate. Such an approach therefore, not only waters down the *de re* and objective status of necessary connection, when it deduces a justification of induction from the entailment of ideas, but it also diffuses the notion of a powerful particular as the basic ontological entity into an infinite series of relations. On the other hand, the question of what makes a complete explanation and the avoidance of a regression into a 'bad infinity' can be overcome by the ontological status of powerful particulars.

Despite these problems such an ontology of internal relations has had some influence in underpinning an anti-individualist method of social analysis. When used in this way, the ontology of internal relations rests on the notion of the social totality and it is Lukács and the American theorist Bertell Ollman who emphasise most strongly the importance of this concept for Marx. Lukács argues, in the opening sentence of 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg' that:

It is not the primacy of economic motives in historical explanation that constitutes the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought but the point of view of the totality. ²¹

He therefore interprets Marx's later works as an intentional description of social totality. This clearly implies a certain ontological view of the world as well as a methodological position. Whereas for Kitching, or for the methodological individualists such as Hayek, the world is only a totality in so far as the observer

²¹ Lukács, G., *History and Class Consciousness* (London, 1971) p. 27

develops a mental construct of fragmented phenomena as a whole, Marx argues that it is because the world actually is an organic whole, brought together by nature that the method used to understand it must develop concepts appropriate to it: organic whole, totality, dialectical relations and so on. Again Lukács stresses this point:

The dialectical method is distinguished from bourgeois thought not only by the fact that it alone can lead to a knowledge of totality; it is also significant that such knowledge is only attainable because the relationship between parts and whole has become fundamentally different from what it is in thought based on the categories of reflection... in every aspect correctly grasped by the dialectic the whole totality is comprehended in that the whole method can be unravelled from every single aspect.²²

Successfully acquiring knowledge of one element of the totality therefore allows knowledge of the whole, because of the inherent relatedness of each element to every other. On Lukács' interpretation, this dialectical relation of each to every other works not just at one particular time but elements in the present are related to those in the future and in the past, in virtue of their position and purpose within the totality. Ollman, in his work *Alienation* interprets Marx in a similar, arguing that Marx's 'conception of reality as a totality composed of internally related parts and his conception of those parts as expandable relations is such that each one in its fullness can represent the totality.'²³

On Ollman's interpretation, Marx posits phenomena as knowable only in virtue of the relations which they enter into, but he also 'goes a step further in conceptually interiorising this interdependence within each thing, so that the conditions of its existence are taken to be part of what it is. Each thing is a part of what everything else is.'²⁴

The legacy of Hegel clearly influences this view in which the sum of all phenomena comprises a single interrelated totality, which Lukács and Ollman regard as Marx's own perspective. For Hegel, all elements are part of a single whole, whose elements are interdependent and interpenetrating. No element can exist without the other elements since each exists in and for the others.

Ollman's argument in his earlier writings affirms that the positions of Hegel and

²² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* p. 27.

²³ Ollman, B., 'Marxism and Political Science: Prolegomenon to a Debate on Marx's Method', *Politics and Society* 3 (1973), p. 495.

²⁴ Ollman, 'Marxism and Political Science' p. 495.

Marx are similar, claiming that Marx's conception of reality is as a totality composed of internally related parts. The strength of Ollman's position is that he links this interpretation of Marx's method to his ontology. He emphasises the importance of Marx's understanding of human beings and their relationship to nature, from which the notion of reality as an organic whole derives. According to Marx, people are both a part of nature and its transformers through the activity of material production. People related to nature through the mediation of productive activity both create artifacts out of it and simultaneously transform themselves and the conditions of their own existence. Emphasising Marx's conception of 'man' as an 'ensemble of social relations'. Ollman responds to the view that people only exist, and can only exist in relation to others, and to nature. Given that this is so, Ollman points to the importance of relations for Marx's dialectical method; the basic unit of reality is not a thing, but a Relation and relations between relations.

At this point, however, certain difficulties arise, as Ollman is aware. The greatest of these is the problem of individuation, which Ollman discusses in relation to the work of the autodidact philosopher Joseph Dietzgen. The question is posed: 'how can knowledge be possible, if every phenomenon is related to the rest of reality? Hegel's own solution is to posit the movement of any particular in relation to the universal which then 'explains' the particular, but this only makes sense on the basis of Hegel's metaphysical schema where, in Platonic fashion universals are prior to particulars. For Marx, and Ollman this route is not available. As a result, Ollman, who asserts that epistemology is possible, finds it difficult to explain how reality could be comprehended. It is clearly impossible to interrogate all the elements of reality simultaneously. The only alternative is to investigate aspects of reality taken as isolable parts, but this begs the question: how is it possible to divide reality into parts when each part is internally related to everything else? The question on this conception of social ontology is not just; where do we start? but rather; how can we start at all?

As a solution Ollman offers the practice of multiple counting; 'what appears as a thing here, may be taken as an attribute of some other thing there. Every quality can be considered as a thing, and every thing as a quality; it all depends on where the line is drawn.'²⁵ This might make an Aristotelian uneasy since it appears to make relative the notion of substance and play fast and loose with the distinction between substance and attribute, but, leaving this aside, Ollman does have a view on how, if not where the individuating line is to be drawn. He elaborates on this further with reference to Dietzgen:

²⁵ Ollman, B., *Alienation* (Cambridge, 1971). p. 38.

the whole is revealed in certain standard parts...because these *are* the parts in which human beings through conceptualisations have actually fragmented the whole. The theoretical problem of individuation is successfully resolved by people in their daily practice.²⁶

However, this pragmatic solution of the problem of individuation cannot be satisfactory, especially on any understanding of the Marxian perspective as a critical perspective on our common sense understanding of the world. The epistemological question of how reality is conceptualised cannot be assumed to be resolved by the optimistic hope that people in their daily lives individuate correctly. That people do individuate is surely true, just as people take for granted other minds, or believe that the sun will rise tomorrow, but what counts is whether people individuate in the right way, distinguishing necessary from accidental changes and the more important and fundamental relations from the less important and less fundamental ones. Equally, the results of a method of multiple counting may be a many-sided explanation, but may also lead to an eclecticism present in Ollman's later work.²⁷

Lukács who also sees the world as a totality of social relations, finds himself confronted with the same problem to which he adds another; perpetual change within the totality.

If a term is to be defined by its relations, all of which are equally important. we can only be said to understand a term if we know how it is related to everything else . And even if this were possible, the relations change all the time and the term is consequently modified, so that we cannot identify terms from one moment to the next.²⁸

Lukács comments that it is difficult to imagine how the proletariat could exert any control over the world when there are no stable objects, and consequently no identifiable regular pattern of behaviour.

The only serious resolution to this problem is to argue that not all relations are equally important and that not all knowledge modifies the object known. This is

²⁶ Ollman, *Alienation* p. 38.

²⁷ In his latest work, *Dialectical Investigations*, for example he argues that the Soviet Union 'is neither socialist nor capitalist, neither a dictatorship nor a democracy, neither a workers state, nor a bureaucratic state ..., but contains elements of all of these.' Ollman, *Dialectical Investigations* (Routledge 1993), p. 110.

²⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* p. 110.

the essence of Marx's own position, and in specifying it the ancient provenance of Marx's thought becomes clear. In articulating the existence of certain basic social entities, and certain basic social relations, Marx does insist that some entities enter into relations and are not, therefore constituted by them. So there is a distinction between the two approaches in that unlike Hegel, Marx does not regard individuals as wholly constituted by their relations, since the relations are themselves constituted by the actions of social entities. In this way Marx's method is parasitic on his ontology since the social world becomes knowable only on the basis of accepting a specific view of the furniture it contains. Some of that furniture consists of ontologically basic substances which enter into external relations with other similar substances.

The Problem of Individuation in Lukács' *Ontology*

When Lukács confronts the task of systematically articulating a Marxist ontology, these problems become magnified. The central concern of Lukács is to reiterate his characteristic position, which dates from *History and Class Consciousness* that Marx's perspective is that of the totality:

The criticism of systems that we accept, and that we find consciously developed in Marx, proceeds from the totality of the existent, and seeks to comprehend it as closely as possible in all its intricate and manifold relationships. Here the totality is in no way a formal and simple ideal but rather the reproduction in thought of the really existing, and the categories are not building blocks of a hierarchical system, but are actually forms of being, characteristics of existence, elements for the construction of relatively total real and dynamic complexes, whose reciprocal inter-relations produce ever more comprehensive complexes.²⁹

Unfortunately, recognition of the validity of the Hegelian-Marxist notion of totality can cause more problems than it resolves. Just in this piece of text, the notion of the 'relatively total' is obscure (since the total either is total, or it is not) as is his rejection of categories as building blocks of a hierarchical system. The basis of Lukács account of Marx's ontology derives from his positive evaluation of the traditional claim that Marx used Hegel's method while rejecting his system. This view was uncontroversial for the theorists of classical Marxism and is reiterated by Lenin. However it is seldom fully articulated in the canonical texts. It is accepted and validated by Lukács on the basis that:

With its ideals of philosophical synthesis the system involves in particular

²⁹ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being* Marx p. 19.

the principle of *completion* and *closure*, ideas that are completely incompatible with the ontological historicity of an existent and already led to irresolvable antimonies in Hegel's own work.³⁰

This is a radical statement. By rejecting the notions of completion and closure Lukács aims to preserve the Marxian insight that phenomena are interrelated, and specifically to reject the static notion of the complete, bounded, element; the unchanging individual abstracted out of any context (itself changing). But in arguing in this manner, Lukács effectively makes epistemology, and indeed ontology impossible. For what is essential to ontology is the outlining (note *outlining* - the drawing of lines) of what there is and what there is not, and in this task the notions of completion and closure are absolutely indispensable. The same applies to any epistemology which admits the knowability of any element at all, since that which is known must be bounded from that which is not. Otherwise the apparently known, since not closed off from the unknown, must assuredly be infected by it. It is not logically possible that what is known necessarily includes what is not known.³¹ If we take Lukács seriously his only tenable epistemological position must be that of the absolute skeptic.

In the course of his account of the system/method counter-position, both Engels and Kautsky are specifically inveighed against. Engels is charged both with occluding the distinctions between logic, epistemology and ontology and on the

³⁰ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being Marx* p. 18 (italics added).

³¹ Consider the Masked Man fallacy, which shows that I can know something under one description but not under another. Suppose I am shown a man in a mask and asked whether I know him or not. I can truthfully assert that I do not know him, even though I truthfully assert that I do know my father. However, the man in the mask is my father. What we have here is a basic substance, which is either known or not known according to which contingent description is applied to it.

Suppose though, that the descriptions were in a relation of logical necessity. In this case (assuming knowledge of the meanings of the words) it would not make sense to say that I knew my father but I did not know the man who begat me. To assent to this would simply be a confusion (if an enlightening one). If I truthfully know my father, I must know the man who begat me.

On the logical entailment model of the internal relatedness of the social world, we are concerned with the second model of knowledge. To know A it is necessary to know all the elements to which A is necessarily related. But within a totality, A is related to all other elements, so that knowledge of A is knowledge of all the elements and of the totality itself, or it is knowledge of nothing. If, for any reason, knowledge of the entire totality is impossible, then all we are able to know is nothing.

If however, we work on the first, Aristotelian model, we aim for knowledge of the basic substances. This knowledge is not dependent on the knowledge of all the contingent descriptions that might apply to that substance. What is clear is that some sort of boundary between substances is necessary if knowledge of them is to be possible.

basis that:

Engels ...was less consistent and deep than Marx and took over unaltered from Hegel much that Marx rejected on the basis of deeper ontological consideration or at least decisively modified.³²

Following the lead of Engels, the orthodox Marxists of the Second International are critiqued for the importation of undialectical rigidity into Marxism³³. The onus is thus placed heavily on Lukács to make good his claim to redraw Marx's social ontology in a way that delivers on the system/method distinction. His whole account here stems from his opposition to the hierarchical structuring of thought which is taken to be the central failing of Hegel's logicisation of history, and the corresponding view that Marx consistently separated ontology from epistemology. This philosophical view consequently frames a role for ontology as a critical backstop:

Only an uninterrupted and vigilant ontological criticism of that which has been established as a fact or a relation, a process or a law can reestablish in thought a true insight into the phenomena.³⁴

If we take this route the question is obviously posed of just how the back stop role is to be made operative: what criteria are to be applied in this back stop role for assessing that which has been established as a fact or relation, and so on. This brings us back in the direction of the problem of individuation outlined above in connection with the discussion of Ollman's theory of internal relations.

The opening section of Lukács second volume on Marx makes clear his picture of the totality as central to the enquiry of social being. These abstractions help to situate his account in the Hegelian tradition, with the caveats about the ontological rather than logical structures implicated in the account outlined above. But they give little guidance to Marx's actual methodological procedure, and evince a permeating uncertainty on how to demarcate the categories Marx regards as basic to his inquiry. Initially Lukács considers the problem ahistorically³⁵ and his reading is more dogmatic here, than later in the book when classes, capitalism and historicity are introduced³⁶ As a result the viability and exposition of this part of

³² Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being 2. Marx* p. 22.

³³ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being 2. Marx* p. 21.

³⁴ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being 2. Marx* p. 29.

³⁵ Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being 2. Marx* p. 34.

³⁶ Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being 2. Marx*

the work is weakened, and it is not surprising that his critical focus is on the early parts of the Introduction to the *Grundrisse*, where Marx himself is at his most speculative, and tentative. Lukács cites Marx's attack on the Hegelians and socialist belletrists who 'regard society as a single subject, that is to say speculatively'³⁷ but his critical comment goes far beyond what Marx has to say:

Here as on so many other occasions, Marx warns against making the irreducible, dialectical and contradictory unity of society, a unity that emerges as the end product of the interaction of innumerable heterogeneous processes into an intrinsically homogeneous unity, and impeding knowledge of this unity by inadmissible and simplifying homogenisations of this kind. We may add that whether this homogenisation is speculative or positivist, it amounts to the same thing in this respect.³⁸

But in any discussion of Marx's method of abstraction, the need to make simplifying homogenisations is apparent, so it is not clear here what Lukács is advocating. What is more, this is not an isolated remark; Lukács says exactly the same thing at a later stage where he draws out the conclusion that this means that 'dialectical knowledge has a merely approximate character'³⁹. But if the processes which build up to society as a substance or as a totality really are innumerable then it is impossible to have a concrete knowledge of them at all. If we cannot number the processes how much less can we know them? Here the problem of individuation which dogs over-Hegelian readings of Marx emerges again. Lukács' response is usually just to assert a denial that the problem is a real one, since the necessary picking out of elements just can be done:

every element and every part in other words is just as much a whole, the element is always a complex with concrete and quantitatively specific properties, a complex of various collaborating forces and relations. However this does not negate its character as an element. The genuine categories of economics really are something final which can be further analysed but cannot be further decomposed in reality.⁴⁰

Yet this leaves unresolved the question of how we can know that, for example, value is a constitutive element of bourgeois society. Lukács of course would accept this role for value, but he is bereft of means to show why it is that value should be considered ontologically basic. He simply works without such criteria,

³⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse* p. 94.

³⁸ Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being* Marx p. 60.

³⁹ Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being* Marx p. 103.

⁴⁰ Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being* Marx p. 30.

and confuses the issues by referring to elements either as 'relatively total', as 'dynamic complexes', and to the backstop role of ontology as cited above. The first is just a mystifying description: if a thing is total, it is presumably totally total. The second term, though appropriate when applied to the 'dynamic complexes' of Marx such as labour, value, product, and so on, is unhelpful and is not up to the task of individuation. The third possibility; to refer to the critical use of ontological considerations, is on the right lines but is the shell of a theory of social individuation and not a theory itself. Although Lukács grapples with this problem he does not resolve it and we are left with the ad hoc individuation which Ollman uses in his work *Alienation*. Despite his failure to resolve this question, Lukács proceeds to give an account of the relations between production and distribution, of labour and its forms, and of class struggle, in which the problem of demarcating entities is simply put on one side. It is tempting to suggest that Lukács' system, which has no clear criterion for individuation and is hostile to the very idea that one should be sought, contradicts his method, where he, like Marx and any social theorist is automatically pushed into demarcating different social entities. In contrast to Lukács' account, an Aristotelian reading would suggest that homogeneity emerges from observation of how things behave, that social theorists individuate social processes and the things that instantiate them by observing behaviour of a certain sort, and not from a preconceived idea of what exists. In contrast, Lukács' hostility to a theory of individuation is perhaps best explained by his characteristic hostility to the reification he sees in competing accounts of social reality:

We have already seen how the primitive mode of appearance of the ontological 'intention recta' can easily lead to a reification of this kind of any existent in the human consciousness and how this process finds a further extension and a fixation in thought in science and philosophy.⁴¹

This is combined with his critique of the theorists of the Second International. they are condemned for their 'undialectical fixity', as we have seen and the critical attitude to fixity and reification is a dominant theme throughout Lukács work.. Nevertheless, the general polemical characterisation of theorists in this way evades the question of how to correct the good intentions of Marxist ontologists, and has problematic politico-theoretical consequences. What is more, the absence of a theory of individuation in Lukács Ontology is implicated in the way that his critique of Stalinism is left only partial.

⁴¹ Lukács, *The Ontology of Social Being* Marx p. 41.

Lukács and Stalinism in the *Social Ontology of Being*

Lukács' relation to Stalinism is complex and dynamic,⁴² but whatever may be said about his later welcoming of the Khrushchev thaw and its limited anti-Stalinism, his internal criticism of the Communist Party, or his turn to the student movements and the NLF in 1968, two central commitments remained unrevised from the mid twenties up to his death. The first was to the political irreplaceability of the official Communist Parties, and the second was to the basic doctrine of Stalin: 'Socialism in One Country'. In the 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács argued that:

After 1924 the Third International correctly defined the position of the capitalist world as one of 'relative stability'. These facts meant that I had to rethink my theoretical position in the debates of the Russian Party. I agreed with Stalin about the necessity for socialism in one country and this shows very clearly in the start of a new epoch in my thought.⁴³

What is more, this long lasting commitment to socialism in one country was not merely a theoretical position: that country existed, and it was the Soviet Union. An identification with the Soviet Union as actually existing socialism, albeit with errors and distortions driven by Stalinism, was axiomatic in Lukács' thought. Even in the anti-Stalinist work *The Present and Future of Democratisation*, published in 1988 he writes that

'One can doubt the objectively socialist character of actually existing socialism only from the standpoint of bourgeois stupidity and slander'⁴⁴

It is inconceivable that these deep rooted commitments would have no echoes in the *Ontology*; and they do resonate in its pages. The lacunae and tensions discussed above are not arbitrary technical problems which any grand project of this sort might throw up, but are intimately linked to this identification with the Soviet Union. Lukács' political commitments find expression in two forms in the *Ontology*; the absence of a theory of individuation, and the reduction of teleology exclusively to the realm of individual human action.

⁴² For an account written from the perspective of the Mandelbrot United Secretariat of the Fourth International, in its most 'third worldist' clothes, see Löwy, M., 'Lukács and Stalinism' in *Western Marxism: A Critical Reader* (London, 1978) pp. 61- 82.

⁴³ Lukács *History and Class Consciousness*, (London, 1971) pp. xxvii-xxviii.

⁴⁴ Lukács, G. *A demokratizalodas jelene es jovoje*, (The Present and Future of Democratisation, (Budapest, 1988) p. 178, cited in Meszaros, I. 'The Communitarian System and the Law of Value in Marx and Lukács' in *Critique* 23, pp. 33-72.

Since it was his identification with the official communist parties, rather than a particular line on the scope of teleology, which was more important to Lukács' self definition as a communist intellectual, it would be tempting to argue that Lukács simply adopted the ontological positions that fitted best with the political considerations at the forefront of his mind. But this would be a little unjust. A more adequate explanation of the complexities faced by Lukács, in a time very different to our own, would involve some consideration of the room for manoeuvre that he had, at particular historical conjunctures. Meszaros explains the situation that Lukács faced as follows:

from the end of the Twenties, criticism was condemned to be abstract theoretical and generic-ideological. Its practical side was narrowly circumscribed by the only feasible instrumentality: the Stalinist Party as the final arbiter over the fate of the competing ideological positions.⁴⁵

What consequences were there in accepting this authority, as Lukács emphatically did? It betokened a certain lack of independence of thought, which was less sharply posed within the field of literary criticism, or aesthetics, areas to which Lukács retreated after the denunciation of the Blum theses of 1928. In the political sphere, such dependence on authority led to an increasingly tensioned and contradictory position being taken up on the nature of the Soviet Union. Within a wider theoretical realm, this position carries with it ontological considerations, since on this view, the Soviet Union provides a model of socialism, whether or not it behaves as a socialist society. The basis of this identification comes from the dictat and authority of the Party, from the self ascription of the social form or simply by virtue of its isolation; the sole society that justified itself on socialist principles. Meszaros explains this by saying that:

it became ever more difficult to envisage concrete material forces of socio-political mediation as an effective form of practical criticism of the prevailing trend of Stalinism. Soviet developments thus increasingly acquired the character of a model of socialism, despite the obvious violations of some elementary principles of socialism, however paradoxical this might seem.⁴⁶

So the isolation and uniqueness of the Soviet Union led many to accept as good coin its self definition. The principle of identity of the Soviet Union: what it is, and

⁴⁵ Meszaros, I., *Lukács' Concept of Dialectic* (London, 1972) p. 81.

⁴⁶ Meszaros, *Lukács Concept of Dialectic* p. 84

how it is to be distinguished from other social forms, is given in the pronouncements of its ruling group; 'developing socialism' under Khrushchev, then, for Brezhnev, 'developed socialism', and so on. Specifically against that position, and in line with the ontological commitments of Marx, can be posed the view that isolates the criterion of individuation of a sort of thing in how it behaves. This is no more than the Aristotelian view that what a thing is, is given by what it does, not what it calls itself. But such a view has wide implications: it is implicitly critical, suggesting that the self description of a social form may not be accurate, and posing an essentially critical view of social reality.

This can be expanded on by a straight forward example derived from Kripke: Fool's gold may look like gold, but it just is not gold, because it does not have the essential structure of gold. Even supposing we have an account of the atomic structure of real gold, but only examples of fools gold; it is simply not appropriate to say that fools gold is the closest we have got and therefore may be counted as gold. It may very well be that real gold does not exist except on paper, in the form of a theoretical description, but an acceptance of iron pyrites as 'near enough to gold to count' is in this example obviously unsatisfactory.

In the real world issue an analogous issue is the identification of Stalinism with socialism; we may understand why the wish to defend and assert the 'actual existence of socialism' because of a kind of gold rush fever - might well lead one to misidentify what one has found, but the mistake is still just that; an objective mistake. The meaning of socialism, like meanings more generally, just 'ain't in the head'.

If, on the other hand, we utilise a different conception of individuation, analysing the behaviour of social forms and, within them, the categories that go to make up the social forms, the special laws that cover the causally potent particulars within a social formation, this can be the first step to an assessment of the *politically* potent mediations between the fact of the existence of Stalinism and the universalistic principles of socialism. It enables an explanation of the ways in which the Soviet Union differs from those principles in terms of the role of the party, social groups, the overall political economy of an isolated and underdeveloped state and so on. Missing this element out, as Lukács does means that the distance between what is, and what ought to be, can only be overcome by an ethical plea. Faced with the gap between his conception of socialism and the practice of Stalinism, but bereft of the Aristotelian equipment to generate an informed analysis of the nature of the beast that he was confronted with, Lukács is driven back to an 'ought-ridden' perspective, reminiscent of Orwell's Boxer, the

totem of the Stakhanovite worker, who responds to the purges with incomprehension and moralism:

I do not understand it. I would not have believed that such things could happen on our farm. It must be due to some fault in ourselves. The solution as I see it, is to work harder.⁴⁷

This view of Lukács' moralism, ably argued by Meszaros in both *Lukács' Concept of the Dialectic* and in *Critique* is reinforced by the circumscription of teleology to acts of human labour, and not to wider social processes. This feature of the *Ontology*, I have argued, returns Lukács to the inadequate forms of explanation that Elster advocates. This conception eventually regards super individual social entities as mute, linked only by contingent causation. In Lukács this emphasis on ethics has the status of a return; as early as 1919 he had recognised the logic of the degeneration of an isolated and underdeveloped proletarian state, but he had focussed on the ability of the proletariat to discipline itself, or to be disciplined from the outside as the critical choice that had to be made in determining in the future of the young Russian workers state. His explanation of Stalinism then, was couched in terms of the moral failings of the proletariat, a perspective that is always likely to prevent theorists from generating an adequate theory of society. Such a theory is a necessary but, of course, not a sufficient basis for being able to control and determine its pattern of development. Without an ontology that focusses on the supra individual collectivities, their potencies and forms of behaviour, all that is left is an ethical plea, as Meszaros argues:

Since the political intermediaries, and instrumental guarantees are missing, the gap between the immediacy of social political realities and the general programme of Marxism has to be filled by means of assigning the role of mediation to ethics, by declaring that ethics is a 'crucial intermediary link' in this whole process. Thus the absence of effective mediatory forces is 'remedied' by a direct appeal to 'reason', to man's 'moral responsibility', to the 'moral pathos of life' to the responsibility of the intellectuals etc. etc. So that, paradoxical as it might seem Lukács finds himself in this respect in the position of ethical utopianism despite his repeated polemics against it, and despite his clear realisation that the intellectual roots of ethical utopianism can be pinpointed in the lack of mediations⁴⁸

Similarly after dispensing with Marx's ontology, Elster also reduces Marxism in

⁴⁷ Orwell, G. *Animal Farm* in *Collected Novels*, (London 1976) p. 45

⁴⁸ Meszaros, I., *Lukács' Concept of Dialectic* (London, 1972) p. 81.

the end to a tiny portion that he finds intellectually respectable: its values. Without ontological tools, change becomes a giant act of will, and in this manner Lukács reinforces an illusion that a sufficient moral effort can restore the universalistic principles of socialism to the Soviet Union. It is just such a perspective that motivated some critics in their judgement of Gorbachev's attempts at reform; a moral appeal, eventually directed to the people over the party, but which in fact operated as an political, ethical and rhetorical veneer over social processes running beyond the control of the centre. It is speculation, but not idle, to suggest that Lukács theoretical direction would have been greatly in sympathy with Gorbachev. If that is found plausible, then we might reflect that the failure of Gorbachev's attempts at reform from above represented also the post mortem on Lukács; that it was August 1991 that finally ended the aspiration. As Meszaros points out, it is in the constraints imposed by his affiliation to Stalinism that the roots of his ethical view are founded:

Once we accept the structural constraints that inevitably go with such premisses, only the moral imperatives of an abstract ethical discourse postulated by Lukács remain as our slender, materially quite unsubstantiated, hope to overcome the contradictions of the present.⁴⁹

Today it is unlikely that Lukács *Ontology* is going to receive much attentions; since, regardless of whether it, as a text, is implicated in a system that has been sent into the dustbin of history, Lukács himself certainly is so implicated. it may be able to agree with Lukács earliest critics that the project of the *Ontology* was a failure. But not for the reasons they thought. If Marx is to be recovered, it must be in the form of an Aristotelian Marx and against the tendencies toward making ontology relative that exist in postmodern thought. So the task that Lukács undertook still was worth the attempt. Lukács' vision lies in the fact that, late in his life he did just that; his failure lies in the inability, because of the constraints of his accommodation to Stalinism, to carry it through. Nonetheless his directing slogan: 'No Ethics without Ontology' is still one that can provide a firm bed rock for the development of emancipatory social theory.

⁴⁹ Meszaros, I. 'The Communitarian System and the Law of Value in Marx and Lukács' in *Critique* 23, p. 69.

Glossary

Aristotelian philosophical terms and some parallels in Marx

dynamis: This has two meanings in Aristotle i) power and ii) potentiality. These are distinguished in the *Metaphysics* (1045b-1046a). Potentiality cannot be defined, he says, but only illustrated as, for example, the waker being potentially a sleeper. The passage between potentiality and actuality is either through art or by means of a principle of nature. The linkage of the two concepts is implicit in Marx; the power of the proletariat is its potential, which however, is necessarily only potential under a social form inimical to the full flourishing of human powers. What is important to the account of Marx here, is the link between potentiality/ actuality, and form/matter the former is more prominent in the early works and the latter in the later works, but they form part of a common ontology. Lukács notices the importance of *dynamis* for Marx in his *Social Ontology*

eide: constitutive nature or, more commonly, form. The important distinction here is between the *eide* of Plato and the *eide* of Aristotle. The chief distinction is that for Aristotle the *eidos* is not a separate existent but a principle of complete substances. Marx follows Aristotle in this respect, as the *Grundrisse* shows, and his critique of the vulgar economists is at least in part, a critique of their Platonism.

ergon: work or, for Aristotle, function and so also used to refer to the (proper) activity of a thing. For Marx the *ergon* of a thing is a way of recognising it as that kind of thing.

genesis: coming into being. Aristotle affirms *genesis* as a version of substantial change, against its denial by Parmenides, and conceives of *genesis* within an overall cycle of *kinesis*. Its correlative is *phthorá*.

hyle: matter, (hence hylomorphism; the theory of form and matter) is a purely Aristotelian term. *Hyle* is like a substance, but it is not a substance since it is not a separate existent or an individual. For Marx, social matter is an essential part of his ontology. It refers both to the process of production that subtends any social form at all, and to the bare individuals who carry out that function. Matter is preeminently a mass noun; like sugar or gold, in that it does not permit of singular locutions: a sugar, a gold, a matter. I argue that for Marx, the sorts of things that serve in his conception as matter, essentially behave in a similar way, so 'an individual' is a problematic term (hence his polemic against the Robinsonades), as is 'a labour'.

kinesis: motion or change. Aristotle's definition of motion is that it is the actualisation of a potentiality *qua* potentiality (*Physics* 200b). *kinesis* is primary (265b-266a) is primary, taking precedence even over *genesis*

logos: account, reason or definition. This is a notoriously difficult term to render into English. Aristotle sometimes uses the term to mean reason or rationality, especially in an ethical context, such as in the *Politics* 1332a. But Castoriadis plausibly suggests that Marx's account utilises a much wider concept of *logos* such that the account of capital is also its logic and definition.

telos: end, purpose. *telos* is a deeply embedded notion in Aristotle's metaphysics and it is variously explained as the Good, (*Physics* 195a) or as the ultimate Good (*Metaphysics* 1072b). The interpretation of Aristotle's teleology is controversial and is discussed in Chapter nine.

on: Parmenides, who first investigated the nature of being postulated a series of logical dichotomies; that which is, cannot not be, and that which is not, cannot be. Consequently *genesis* and *phthorá*; the passage from being to non being, and its reverse, are denied. It was at least in part to overcome these dichotomies that Aristotle evokes the notion of substantial and accidental change.

ousiai: substance Aristotle transforms the question of what being is to into the question of what substance is, since being is first and foremost, substance the criteria of substantiveness, are non predication and non parasitism.. substances come to be and pass away as matter is enformed and then loses form. Marx's broad ontology of social existence follows this pattern, allowing him to conceive of society as a substance.

phthorá: decay or passing away. For Aristotle *phthorá* is a particular form of substantial change, and takes when matter throws of its form. Marx uses the notion in his conception of the transitory nature of a social form such as bourgeois society.

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