9

"No Particular Wrong"

The Abolition of Morality

Over the course of the preceding chapters, I have argued for the claim that Marx's theory has an ethical content which remains consistent throughout his work, though deepened and elaborated over the course of his life. Marx's materialism, his skepticism of bourgeois "justice," his criticisms of particular existing moral doctrines, and his rejection of moral suasion as a primary means of transforming society do not license the claim that his was an "amoralist" theory.

And yet those who read him this way are not entirely without rationale for doing so. Marx does describe the "abolition" of morality as one of the welcome achievements of the communist movement. He further indicates that a fully developed communist society would be without moral reasoning, as such. Without a firm grasp of the *historicity* of Marxist theory, it is all too easy to conflate Marx's predictions about what lies in the future with descriptions of the world at present. We are not yet living in the time of material abundance and full human realization envisioned by Marx and other communists. We cannot yet totally dispense with moral theory in the meanwhile. Morality is an attempt to theorize and close the gap between the world as it is and the world as it should be. Marxism is a theory that posits that the world can be *made* what it should be. But we are not there yet.

Therefore, it is both true that morality is valid, salient, and necessary in our current conditions, and that it will eventually lose this salience in a transition to fully developed communist society. If this claim seems odd, consider the person who announces that after careful moral analysis and contemplation, they have finally arrived at the conclusion that it would be wrong for them to harm an innocent stranger purely for their own private gratification. Compare them to another person to whom this desire, and the attendant moral question, simply never occurs. The fact that for the first person, it even comes up as a moral question at all, speaks unflatteringly to their character. In Marxist theory, this same comparison can be made on the level of the

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species. Morality is a contingent historical ideological form that has come into existence at a definite point in history and will pass out of existence once certain historical conditions are met, if they are met.

Responding to Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* and writing within the German context, Marx argues that human emancipation can be achieved in only one way:

> In the formulation of a class with *radical chains*, a class of civil society which is not a class of civil society, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates, a sphere which has a universal character by its universal suffering and claims no *particular right* because no *particular wrong*, but *wrong generally*, is perpetuated against it; which can invoke no *historical*, but only *human*, title; which does not stand in any one-sided antithesis to the consequences but in all-round antithesis to the premises of German statehood; a sphere, finally, which cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all other spheres of society and thereby emancipating all other spheres of society, which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*. This dissolution of society as a particular estate is the *proletariat*.[1]

Marx's claim is that the proletariat is unique in the complete coincidence of its interests with the interests of humanity. Hence, the wrongs committed against it are not simply contrary to any specific or "particular" interests it might have as a class. Wrongs committed against the proletariat are wrongs against humanity, itself: "wrong generally." This is why, from its own class perspective, the proletariat need not preach morality as such, nor have morality preached to it. In pursuing its emancipation from the dehumanizing, exploiting, and alienating reach of capital, it concretely constitutes the practical resolution of the most pressing ethical problem of our time. In this sense, workers' revolutionary activity also presages the "abolition of morality" that Marx foresees as a consequence of any future transition to a fully developed communist society, with its resolution of the contradictions between private interest and public good, and its forging of those conditions within which we might concretize into practice, and dissolve as an ethical imperative, the treatment of every person as though they were an end in themselves.

In the present chapter, I begin with a discussion of Marx's highly critical stance toward "sacrifice." Marx's insistence on the coincidence of individual with social interest, a coincidence which he sees not as merely theoretical

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but as already realized in workers' struggle, will help set the stage for making sense of his theory's implications regarding morality's abolition.

The End of Sacrifice

In writings both before and after those which make up his and Engels's *Critique of the German Ideology*, Marx distinguishes between, on the one hand, rational assessments of how human needs can best be satisfied and, on the other, moralistic calls for self-sacrifice. One key aspect of this distinction is that the two approaches must rely on different modes of motivation. The scientific communism developed by Marx depends on a correct assessment of the real needs of existing persons and aims to show rationally how the needs of people can be satisfied through effective political action and revolutionary activity. The Utopianism he criticizes (in the Bauer brothers and others), however, relies upon mere moralism—emotional appeals designed to make up for the fact that Utopianism lacks the resources to have motivational force on a pragmatic basis.

As we saw in Chapter 2, critiques of moralism play a key role in Marx's arguments against the "True Socialists." These are Utopian socialists who, Marx charged, rely upon the pronouncement of moral edicts to make up for their lack of a concrete political program by means of which socialism could be realized. This distinction between scientific communism—a theory derived using the method of historical materialism—and Utopianism is brought to bear most clearly in a document that Marx wrote with Engels, known as the "Circular against Kriege." This document critiques the rhetorical practices of Hermann Kriege, a socialist and editor of the New York-based, German-language newspaper, *Der Volks-Tribun*. Here, I will explain Marx's and Engels's criticisms of Kriege, and how these criticisms shed light upon Marx's approach to morality.

Der Volks-Tribun was produced and distributed in New York with the aim of representing the principles of the Communist Correspondence Committee to communists in the United States. Under Kriege's tenure as editor (or at least, so Marx charged), the editorial line of the journal began to deviate away from scientific communism and toward Utopianism and moralism, making irrational appeals to emotion in order to convince readers to take up the cause of communism. Finally, the editorial line of *Der Volks-Tribun* veered so sharply away from the principles of the organization it was

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supposed to represent, that Marx and Engels introduced a set of resolutions to a meeting of the Correspondence Committee, denouncing Kriege for what they referred to as "fantastic emotionalism" put forward under the guise of communism. These resolutions constitute the aforementioned circular in question.

A particularly important piece of evidence in Marx's and Engels's case against Kriege is what they regard as the latter's enthusiastic promotion of self-sacrifice as a communist virtue.[2] Instead of arguing for the coincidence of working people's self-interest with the interest of humanity, Kriege posits a moral sacrifice of setting one's own interests aside for the good of "others" who will benefit from a transition to socialism. This notion of sacrifice, of setting one's own interests aside, is totally at odds with Marxism. Marxist theory argues that all human beings have an objective interest in the realization of a communist society and of human emancipation. Further, Marxism addresses itself to that part of society whose subjective interest in surviving under capitalism aligns it with the cause of human emancipation. Marx and Engels charged that Kriege, instead, argued for communism not as a practical answer to the problems facing human beings, but rather as a moral imperative to be realized out of a sense of one's duty to humanity. In doing so, Kriege does precisely what, as we saw in previous chapters, critics such as Max Stirner accused communism of doing. This moralism posits "the common good," or "humanity," as an abstraction that demands sacrifices from real, concrete, human individuals, expressing alienation in a different form, rather than serving to abolish it.

The argument becomes yet clearer when Marx and Engels strike their final blow against the "sacrificing" Kriege.[3] They criticize Kriege because he expects to be praised for sacrificing himself for the good of others, instead of seeing revolutionary activity as something that he carries out for his own benefit as well as that of others. Kriege writes to the readers of *Der Volks-Tribun*, "We have other things to do than worry about our *miserable selves*, we belong to mankind." Marx replies:

> With this shameful and nauseating grovelling before a "mankind" that is separate and distinct from the "self" and which is therefore a metaphysical and in his case even a religious fiction, with what is indeed the most utterly "miserable" slavish self-abasement, this religion ends up like any other. Such a doctrine, preaching the voluptuous pleasure of cringing and

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> self-contempt, is entirely suited to valiant—*monks*, but never to men of action, least of all in a time of struggle. It only remains for these valiant monks to castrate their "miserable selves" and thereby provide sufficient proof of their confidence in the ability of "mankind" to reproduce itself!—If Kriege has nothing better to offer than these sentimentalities in pitiful style, it would indeed be wiser for him to translate his "Père Lamennais" again and again in each issue of the *Volks-Tribun*.[4]

Marx and Engels accuse Kriege of misrepresenting communism as "a religion of love," rather than presenting it as a science of human progress and development; to follow Kriege's reasoning would be essentially to take up a religious attitude toward humanity as a new god rendered into pseudo-materialist terms.[5] We do not "belong to mankind," to which we must constantly sacrifice our individual self-interest. One *should* be "worried about oneself"; it is in fact this concern with oneself and one's own circumstances that can be linked together with an argument for rational social control over society's resources. For those whose activity is the production and reproduction of society, there is no need for a moral leap across some perceived gap between individual self-interest and the general interest of society.

Marx and Engels are quite clear in separating their own theory from what they take to be Kriege's moralistic grandstanding. The point of communism is not for people to stop "worrying about themselves." Although Marx does not refer to "alienation" here, his comments here on sacrifice relate directly to the problem of alienation. To sacrifice oneself, after all, is to alienate oneself from oneself, to give oneself over to a being that is separate, for the satisfaction of aims that are considered more important than one's own. Marx does not think human progress can be aided by human self-denial, but rather, by human seeking for satisfaction and fulfillment. So what Kriege presents is not communist practice, but rather, as Marx and Engels call it, "a religion of love," an irrational and emotionalist call to self-alienation. Without a material link between self-interest and the general interest, Kriege retreats to an irrational appeal to emotion to make individuals do what is necessary for "society," an entity whose interests are imagined to be opposed to their own.

Sacrifice appears in Marx's work as an important theme as early as *The Holy Family* and shows up again in his polemic against Max Stirner, which makes up the bulk of what was later collected and posthumously published as *The Critique of The German Ideology*. There, Marx responds to Stirner's

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charge that communism is a so-called good cause, requiring human beings to sacrifice for a "greater good." Marx argues that far from requiring individuals to engage in sacrifice or altruism, his theory of communism is based on the needs and interests of people; it seeks to develop, confirm, and realize human individuals, not to promote sacrifice and self-renunciation. As Marx writes, Stirner's mistake in his critique of communism is in thinking that

> the communists want to "make sacrifices" for "society," when they want at most to sacrifice existing society; in this case he should describe their consciousness that their struggle is the common cause of all people who have outgrown the bourgeois system as a sacrifice that they make to themselves.[6]

As we saw also in our discussion of alienation (in Chapter 4 of this volume), Marx rejects sacrifice as a part of his communist theory. Therefore, Marx argues, Stirner is mistaken in his understanding of communism as a call to sacrifice and Hermann Kriege is mistaken in urging workers not to "worry about themselves." Marx has no need to urge the proletariat on with romantic appeals to sacrifice because he proposes a course of action that is consonant with people's interests, rather than at odds with them.

For Marx, unalienated human beings perform labor for one another not as a sacrifice but as an act of self-realization, in conditions of human emancipation, circumstances are arranged so that in satisfying the needs of others in society I am also directly satisfying my own needs. As Jan Kandiyali has pointed out, "This claim is philosophically distinctive. Philosophers before Marx emphasize self-realization (though they did not always use that term), but few saw meeting others' needs as constitutive of it."[7]

In Marx's private letters, he sometimes does praise the "sacrifice" of members of the Paris Commune and of other revolutionary struggles.[8] And he is perfectly aware that revolutionaries often do their work at great personal cost to themselves. Nothing in his arguments against Kriege or the Utopian Socialists can be taken to imply that Marx is unaware of the courage and dedication of such people, or that he is somehow stinting in his praise of them. But in attacking Kriege's "groveling," "self-sacrifice," and "religion of love," Marx's point is to thoroughly reject and distance himself from the moralism implicit in it. For Kriege, Marx argues, revolutionaries ought to act out of a sense of duty to the abstraction of "mankind," before which they are "nothing." This is anathema to Marx; it is not what he is praising in the revolutionaries who endure great risk and hardship to carry out their work.

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Meanings of Morality's Abolition

It is in *The Communist Manifesto* that Marx most clearly articulates the notion of morality's abolition, defending it in the course of a debate he imagines between himself and a bourgeois interlocutor.[9] That interlocutor charges that "communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion, and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience."[10] The accusation here is (at least) twofold. First, that communism treats as merely historical and contingent what ought to be regarded as eternal and necessary. And second, that communism unjustifiably rejects the inductive hypothesis that the future will be like the past and that, therefore, morality will persist into the future, much as it has existed in the past. Marx responds that indeed communism *does* abolish morality, just as its critics charge. As it is the fact of class exploitation that gives rise to morality, it is only fitting that morality should "vanish" with the "total disappearance of class antagonisms."

Marx writes, representing the conversation between himself and the imagined bourgeois interlocutor:

> "Undoubtedly," it will be said, "religious, moral, philosophical and juridical ideas have been modified in the course of historical development. But religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law, constantly survived this change."
>
> "There are, besides, eternal truths, such as Freedom, Justice, etc., that are common to all states of society. But Communism abolishes eternal truths, it abolishes all religion and all morality, instead of constituting them on a new basis; it therefore acts in contradiction to all past historical experience."
>
> What does this accusation reduce itself to? The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain common forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms.
>
> The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.[11]

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What does Marx mean here? One interpretive challenge for understanding Marx is presented by the heavy use of irony that is characteristic of his style throughout his written corpus. Brazilian Marxist and literary theorist, Ludovico Silva, writes in his 1971 book *Marx's Literary Style*, "Marx was a lifelong ideoclast, one of the fiercest and most fervent idea breakers of all time." Among Marx's most devastatingly "ideoclastic" weapons was his biting irony, perfectly calibrated to cut away the cloak around a thing and reveal it as its own dialectical opposite. The declaration that the realization of full human flourishing in the course of communist development would be coincident with the abolition of religion, morality, philosophy, political science, and law will strike many as so apparently outlandish on its face that perhaps we ought to interpret this bold claim in a highly deflationary and ironic way. Yes, Marx said it, but he couldn't have really *meant* it, such a reading would maintain. Perhaps he intended some hidden, subtler, meaning that is drenched here in irony.

To prefer a weaker, less radical reading where it is available is an entirely reasonable principle of textual interpretation. In this case, however, we have Marx insisting as explicitly and directly as he can that he fully intends the "most radical" meaning. He does so precisely to push back against and rule out weaker ones. In keeping with the "ideoclastic" nature of Marx's critique, it behooves us to entertain interpretations that render "abolition" in the strongest possible terms, so long as to do so is compatible with Marx's other claims and with his theoretical system as a whole. And indeed, it does follow immediately from the claim that morality is a form of the social consciousness of class antagonisms, that the total resolution and abolition of these antagonisms would produce material circumstances in which the forms of consciousness uniquely corresponding to class society could finally, in Marx's words, "completely vanish."

Marx's statements in the *Manifesto* regarding the abolition of morality, et al. do not appear in a vacuum. Rather, they are the culmination of a series of irony-inflected replies to various bad-faith accusations made against communists. In each case, irony is deployed as a kind of negation of the negation, through which Marx responds to communism's accusers by insisting pugnaciously that yes, the communist movement does intend to destroy that thing which it is accused of seeking to destroy. The irony, however, is that the thing in question—individuality, freedom, family, morality—isn't what it is declared to be and is already negated by capitalism's own destructive

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processes.[12] What communism seeks to abolish is the supposedly hallowed thing—private property, nation, etc.—as it actually exists, which is to say, as a decaying mockery of itself. The "destructive" role of communism in these examples is largely to dismantle illusion and pretension—to call a thing a thing, sweep aside the decay, and produce new social forms better suited to the real state of things. In each case, Marx proclaims that these features of class society must be done away with totally, not merely reformed and reconstituted.

As Peter Hudis writes in his 2015 essay "The Ethical Implications of Marx's Concept of a Post-Capitalist Society,"

> Marx's normative objection to the phenomenon of inversion informs his view of a post-capitalist society. Since Marx locates the central problem of capitalism in the dominance of the subject by products and activity of its own making, a new society represents the inversion of this inversion insofar as it abolishes any condition in which such a situation prevails.[13]

Take for example Marx's response to the charge that the communists wish to do away with countries and nationalities. It illuminates his statement that "in the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of all nationality."[14] I reproduce it here in full:

> The Communists are further reproached with desiring to abolish countries and nationality.
>
> The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got. Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself the nation, it is so far, itself national, though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.
>
> National differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing, owing to the development of the bourgeoisie, to freedom of commerce, to the world market, to uniformity in the mode of production and in the conditions of life corresponding thereto.
>
> The supremacy of the proletariat will cause them to vanish still faster. United action, of the leading civilized countries at least, is one of the first conditions for the emancipation of the proletariat.

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> In proportion as the exploitation of one individual by another is put an end to, the exploitation of one nation by another will also be put an end to. In proportion as the antagonism between classes within the nation vanishes, the hostility of one nation to another will come to an end.[15]

Marx's response to the allegation follows a structure that appears in numerous iterations throughout the "Proletarians and Communists" section of the *Manifesto*. First, he states the allegation. Next, he counters that communists are hardly needed to destroy the object in question, since from the point of view of labor, that thing is already demolished and dismantled by capitalism and does not truly exist. In other words, only from a bourgeois perspective might it seem that the working class would experience the loss of nation as a loss to itself. Workers cannot lose what capitalism has already deprived them of. What remains is not to reconstitute some form of bourgeois nationalism for the working class, but rather for workers to develop and embrace class solidarity with one another across national borders. Capitalism has initiated the dissolution of national antagonisms and now it is up to the international working class to finish the job.

Marx highlights the inherent irony of the bourgeoisie's feigned anxiety about what the "loss" of nation-states would mean for workers, when it is the capitalist system that has set into motion those processes which make it so that working people already have no country to claim. Insofar as nation-states function undemocratically—facilitating the suppression of working people's autonomy, self-activity, and struggle for emancipation—the much-vaunted benefits of "citizenship" are, for all intents and purposes, already practically absent for workers. For working people to truly "have" a nation to claim, they must have political representation within that nation. True democratic representation for working people can be achieved only through proletarian self-organization and self-activity, conducted independently of bourgeois control. In its essential role as an instrument of class repression, this is precisely what the bourgeois state is organized to prevent. For working people to bring about full democracy, they must look beyond their national borders, distinguish their interests from those of the bourgeois state, organize internationally, and be in active solidarity with the working people of all countries. Those conditions in which the proletariat of a country might "constitute itself as the nation" are also precisely those that would ring the death knell for "national differences and antagonisms" already weakened by the homogenizing and universalizing process of global capitalist exchange.

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We have already seen, in Chapters 6 and 7, how Marx makes analogous rhetorical moves in response to his imagined interlocutor's accusations that communists seek to destroy freedom and individuality. He writes,

> In bourgeois society, living labour is but a means to increase accumulated labour. In Communist society, accumulated labour is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the labourer.
>
> In bourgeois society, therefore, the past dominates the present; in Communist society, the present dominates the past. In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality.
>
> And the abolition of this state of things is called by the bourgeois abolition of individuality and freedom! And rightly so. The abolition of bourgeois individuality, bourgeois independence, and bourgeois freedom is undoubtedly aimed at.[16]

Here, too, Marx deploys irony to present communism—the movement of workers' struggle against capitalist exploitation and for their own emancipation—as the negation of the negation. What communism seeks to destroy, he explains, are *bourgeois* individuality, *bourgeois* independence, and *bourgeois* freedom which, for working people, each exist concretely as the very opposite of what they announce themselves to be in theory. *Human* individuality, independence, and freedom would be produced in their place, but only in the course of sweeping away their sham, bourgeois impostors.

One might here reason that Marx's claims about the abolition of morality ought to be understood along similar lines: perhaps Marx does not mean that morality will be abolished *as such*, but rather only that *bourgeois* morality will be swept away and replaced with a new proletarian morality that would persist into fully developed communism, long after humans' alienated condition had already been overcome.

That reading has immediate plausibility but misses a key distinction between concepts such as freedom and individuality on the one hand, and morality, religion, and law on the other. The former, Marx regards as constitutive features of unalienated human social Being. Throughout his writings both before and after the *Manifesto*, Marx speaks of freedom and individuality as aspects of human life that develop over the course of human history in trajectories that partially co-constitute the fully realized flourishing of human beings themselves. Morality et al., on the other hand, which he

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and Engels describe as forms of ideology, also develop in ways that are determined by human history, but they belong specifically to a particular period within that history—the period within which human life is structured by domination, class conflict, and exploitation. Freedom and individuality in their human, rather than merely bourgeois form, are essential features of fully realized human nature. As such, while their bourgeois form will be abolished with the development of communism, they will nonetheless appear there in a *human* and unalienated form. Morality, by contrast, belongs to the "social consciousness" of a particular age—the age of class-based domination of some human beings over others, of external imperatives to which one is compelled to conform. The abolition of morality's bourgeois form—the form in which its contradictions are most fully expressed and beyond which lies not only the abolition of bourgeois domination, but of all domination and, in domination's place, the realization of true human emancipation—is therefore also morality's abolition *in toto*. There is no unalienated form which the abstract theorization of, and obedient submission to, an external moral law can take for beings who exist within "an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."[17]

As we saw in Chapter 8, even Kantian self-legislation counts, for Marx, as an external, alien command. This is in part because while Kant's account describes moral agents who are free to bind themselves (or not) to a priori moral law as they will, that law remains something eternal, unchanging, and undetermined by human history. Human beings can choose whether or not to obey it, but in obeying it, they subordinate themselves to it; an aspect especially highlighted by Kant's emphasis on the sacrificial character of morality and his insistence that human obedience to the moral law is all the more distinctively moral, the more it comes at a personal cost.

Consequentialist moral theories such as J. S. Mill's utilitarianism do not fare very much better and, Marx argues, also constitute alienated ways of relating to the world and the things in it. Just as capitalist exchange dissolves the manifold differences among things into the single category of money as universal abstract value, so utilitarianism, for Marx, is symptomatic of our incapacity to see objects for what they are. We do not see the world-in-itself and still less, the world-for-us; but rather, the world-for-capital. Commodity exchange conditions our perception of the world so that we never see or know things as they are, instead appreciating them only in light of their usefulness for yielding some further abstract end. Instead of apprehending things in

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their concrete fullness, we relate to them as so many interchangeable means to some abstract, empty form: money, in the one case, and utility, in the other.

Interpretive alternatives remain, however, for caching out fully what is meant by an "abolition of all morality instead of constituting it on a new basis." Let us consider two immediately plausible accounts of what this phrase might mean for Marx. The first interpretation of this claim would be that there is no genuine fact of the matter about morality in a fully developed communist society. The second is that there *would* be genuine facts of the matter about morality in such a society, but that the members of society would not engage in distinctively moral reasoning to ascertain those facts.[18] Let us consider these alternatives in order.

The first alternative is the one that construes Marx's prediction most radically and counterintuitively (but also, I think, most accurately). On this reading, for Marx, a fully developed communist society is a society without any fact of the matter at all about (what would be only so-called) moral requirements. For the members of fully developed communist society, prosocial ways of being are not obligations or claims made against them; they are simply their already fully inhabited and fully expressed ways of being. Human beings in such a society would be no more morally required to behave in prosocial ways than they are "morally required" to be primates. It is helpful here to think heuristically of morality as concerning a "gap" between the world as it is and the world as it ought to be.[19] No gap, no fact of the matter about what ought to be done to close the gap.

Consider again, in this context, Marx's and Engels's claim that

> morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness . . . have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.[20]

To interpret the abolition of morality as a condition in which there is no fact of the matter about moral requirements at all best expresses historical materialist ideology critique. Morality is not some independent, abstract, external set of commandments handed down to humanity from the outside. It arises imminently from human conditions and forms of being. If the forms of

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alienated, exploited social being that give rise to morality go away, then morality as such goes with them.

The second interpretive possibility I presented above is that to say that morality is "abolished" in fully developed communist society is simply to say that while there might be facts of the matter about what is morally right or wrong, the members of such a society wouldn't engage in distinctively moral reasoning to arrive at those facts. Unlike the first alternative, there is no robust metaethical claim here about the standing or validity of moral claims as such. On the first alternative, no one in a fully developed communist society is, properly speaking, ever morally obligated. On the second alternative, the members of that future society might well be morally obligated to do all sorts of things. It is only that they do not represent those obligations to themselves in thought, and they do not *do* moral theory in order to ascertain moral obligations. They discharge their obligations because it is already embedded in their forms of life that they would do so. Unfortunately for this interpretation, it is ruled out by Marx's vehement insistence that "morality [*die Moral*, in his German]" is not simply "constituted on a new basis," but abolished altogether. In fully developed communism, there is no social form taking the shape of a command that human beings "follow," even if only unwittingly.

A third possibility, sharing similarities with each of the first two, is that we should seek recourse in Hegel's notion of *Sittlichkeit*, standardly translated into English as "ethical life." For Hegel, *Sittlichkeit* denotes a rational, well-ordered society with inhabitants who inhabit their social roles comfortably and readily, feeling at home in them. In the place of abstract moral commands to do, out of duty, what one would perhaps rather not do, individuals in conditions of *Sittlichkeit* actively embrace the activities associated with their roles. The private will of each individual is then coincident and in harmony with the good of society as a universal and collective whole. If the aim of communism is to be understood as the realization of *Sittlichkeit*, then a fully developed communist society would be one made of people for whom morally correct behavior has become habitual and customary. Importantly, these are not moral automata; their easy and comfortable embrace of their roles is the free, active expression of their fully realized selves.

In her book *Hegel on Second Nature and Ethical Life*, Andreja Novakovic writes that Hegel is to be understood as arguing that in *Sittlichkeit*,

> true conscience is no longer engaged in deriving objective content through its own resources or testing what is publicly recognized against the

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> measure of its subjective convictions. Its particular duties are prescribed by its specific position within the social order and it is committed to the requirements internal to its roles. So in an objectively rational social order the basic tension between social expectations and particular commitment is (for the most part) overcome, since I form my commitments within the context of institutional roles.[21]

Novakovic's characterization elegantly expresses that human beings in conditions of ethical life are not passive, automatic beings; they are rational, free, and active individuals who subjectively embrace their role expectations precisely because these expectations emerge from social arrangements that are themselves rationally ordered. We can also be put in mind of Karen Ng's observations about friendship in her book *Hegel's Concept of Life*, where she writes:

> The act of visiting your friend realizes good friendship, not because it is deduced from the practical syllogism, but because it is an act of self-determination, an act of self-determination that can only take place by reflecting the power of an objective universality or genus—in this case, the rational, ethical institution of friendship, which itself exists within the more encompassing objective universality of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*).[22]

Yet crucially, to say that prosocial behavior is habitual among human beings for whom *Sittlichkeit* is realized as a fact of life is *not* to say that there will be no disagreement or conflict whatsoever. Molly Farneth illuminatingly presents this point in her book *Hegel's Social Ethics*, arguing that *Sittlichkeit* is best understood as a condition in which differences are resolved through democratic deliberation among rational agents who relate to one another through "full-fledged, reciprocal recognition," and for whom such mutual recognition and regard is not still an ideal to be aimed at, but an already realized fact about human social life.[23]

Communism as *Sittlichkeit* has significant immediate plausibility, especially given Marx's philosophical indebtedness to Hegel. The rub is that a Marxist conception of fully developed communism simply cannot incorporate Hegel's conception of stable social roles as part of unalienated human life; and yet the notion of such social roles grounds the very concept of *Sittlichkeit*. The notion that one would embrace a particular defined role (or even multiple roles) within a well-ordered society, inhabit it, and joyfully

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organize one's activity in accordance with the remit associated with that role, is too much akin to what Marx seeks to reject in capitalism's system of divided labor, which he believes artificially limits and stultifies humans' capacity to relate to the world directly, immediately, creatively, and expansively.[24]

The Critique of the German Ideology features a famous and brief sketch of daily life in communist society, which serves to help illustrate this point:

> As soon as the division of labour comes into being, each man has a particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a shepherd, or a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood; whereas in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.[25]

Freedom, for Marx, is not the subjective embrace of stable and defined social roles, but a life unmediated and undetermined, as far as possible, by any such roles at all. One is then simply a human being (or, as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, a "rich individual"), shaping and reshaping one's interactions with the world and constantly reforging one's connections to it, and to the other people in it, *as* a human being—which is to say, as a dynamic and endlessly changing being whose relationship to the world can never be exactly what it was the day or year before. It is spontaneity unleashed. There is no principle to refer to, not the abstract universal principles of normative moral theory, nor even the "principle" of the defined social role that determines appropriate action for the person who inhabits it. The "rich individual" of communist society apprehends everything freshly, as the unique and particular object, person, or situation that it is. If such an individual can be said to inhabit and embrace any social role, that is simply the endlessly expansive role of a "human," which is to say, of a being fully engaged in the activity of in-principle boundless and ongoing self-change.

How does one approach the world in a human way? Clues are to be found in Marx's discussions, throughout his work, of how capitalism frustrates sense-perception and our subjective representations of the external world.

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Commodity exchange and universal saleability, as we noted earlier, have conditioned our relations to other human beings such that we perceive them not directly, not as they are, but in terms of their abstract "usefulness" to us. Ruth Groff illuminates this point in her essay "Aristotelian Marxism/Marxist Aristotelianism," where she writes,

> The contention from a Marxist perspective is that the principled disregard for the particular, at the level of thought, expresses, *at* the level of thought, the principled disregard for the particular that is the mark of exchange-value. . . . If Kantian pure practical reason expresses the abstraction of exchange-value, the instrumental reason of utilitarianism can be seen to express the fact that commodified goods are produced not for their own sake, but instead as means—means to an end unrelated to their use-values.[26]

A consideration of *Capital* underscores the correctness of Groff's analysis. There, Marx writes,

> The expansion of value, which is the objective basis or main-spring of the circulation M—C—M, becomes [the capitalist's] subjective aim, and it is only in so far as the appropriation of ever more and more wealth in the abstract becomes the sole motive of his operations, that he functions as a capitalist, that is, as capital personified and endowed with consciousness and a will. Use-values must therefore never be looked upon as the real aim of the capitalist; neither must the profit on any single transaction. The restless never-ending process of profit-making alone is what he aims at.

The world of commodity exchange is structured such that, just as we approach labor as a mere means to biological subsistence—and not as the highest active expression of our species-nature as creative and "self-changing" beings—so do we approach one another as so many interchangeable means to the end of endless private accumulation. This disturbed relationship to our fellow human beings cannot be overcome through individual acts of willing our behavior to be in accordance with an abstract moral law that commands us to treat other people as ends in themselves. It requires a massive social transformation that abolishes those present conditions which incline us to regard everything and everyone as means to the limitless acquisition of, itself, empty and abstract value.

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Marx, following Hegel, regards utilitarianism as a quite pure ethical expression of universal saleability and exchange. In the course of his arguments against Stirner, Marx writes,

> The extent to which this theory of mutual exploitation, which Bentham expounded *ad nauseam*, could already at the beginning of the present century be regarded as a phase of the previous one is shown by Hegel in his *Phänomenologie*. See there the chapter "The Struggle of Enlightenment with Superstition," where the theory of usefulness is depicted as the final result of enlightenment. The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that in modern bourgeois society all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation.[27]

In this critique of capital's tendency to flatten distinctions and obscure our perception of things, relationships, and people, Marx echoes earlier remarks, from his 1844 manuscripts, about vision, sense-perception generally, and epistemic access to the external world. In his "Private Property and Labor" manuscript, for example, Marx writes that "private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only *ours* when we have it—when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunken, worn, inhabited, etc.—in short, when it is *used* by us."[28] He goes on:

> Although private property itself again conceives all these direct realisations of possession only as means of life, and the life which they serve as means is the life of private property—labour and conversion into capital.
>
> In the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*. The human being had to be reduced to this absolute poverty in order that he might yield his inner wealth to the outer world. . . .
>
> The abolition of private property is therefore the complete emancipation of all human senses and qualities, but it is this emancipation precisely because these senses and attributes have become, subjectively and objectively, human. The eye has become a human eye, just as its object has become a social, human object—an object made by man for man. The senses have therefore become directly in their practice theoreticians. They relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective

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> human relation to itself and to man, and vice versa. Need or enjoyment has consequently lost its egotistical nature, and nature has lost its mere utility by use becoming human use.[29]

It would perhaps be tempting to gloss over Marx's references to organs of sense-perception, were it not for its connection to several themes that permeate his work and, most notably, to what we know about the keen interest Marx took early on in a study of Aristotle's *De Anima*, with its reflections on sense-perception, the nature of the soul, and the relationship between form and matter. As Scott Meikle notes in his book *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, "Marx made the first German translation with commentary of *De Anima*," apparently with the initial intent of preparing this translation for publication.[30]

Perhaps the most-discussed passage in *De Anima* has to do with the relationships between form and matter, and between potentiality and actuality, in constituting the activity of sense-perception. Aristotle writes,

> It is necessary to grasp, concerning the whole of perception generally, that perception [*aisthêsis*] is what is capable of receiving perceptible forms without the matter, as wax receives the seal of a signet ring without the iron or gold. It acquires the golden or the metallic seal, but not insofar as it is gold or metal. In a similar way, perception is also in each case affected by what has the colour or taste or sound, but not insofar as each of these is said to be something, but rather insofar as each is of a certain quality, and corresponding to its proportion.
>
> The primary sense organ is that in which this sort of potentiality resides. The sense organ and this potentiality are, then, the same though their being is different.[31]

A long-standing interpretive puzzle about how to understand Aristotle's *De Anima* centers on Aristotle's physiology of sense-perception which has appeared, at least on its face, implausible to numerous of his commentators. In a famous line from the text, Aristotle writes that ensouled beings have a perceptive faculty which is initially unlike the object of perception but that, "on being affected it becomes like what has acted on it."[32] He goes on later in the text to say, "Perception is being affected in a certain way. Thus the active thing makes that which is potentially like it like it in actuality."[33] This view appears to account for sense-perception as a consequence of the organ of

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perception being affected by the object of perception in a manner that alters the sense-organ, making it like that which it senses so that in some sense, an eye literally *becomes* blue when in the presence of a blue object; it would then be this transformation of the eye from potentially blue, to actually blue, that counts as perceiving blueness with the organ of sight.

This is, needless to say, deeply puzzling. In his lectures on the history of philosophy, Hegel made sense of it in the following way. He argued that it would be mistaken to think simply that the form of "blueness," as an active principle, affects the material eye, which remains passive in the act of perception. Instead, he argued, one ought to think of the sense-organ as becoming like its object in the sense that the seeming separation between them is overcome so that there is not a passive, material subject on the one side and an active, ideal object on the other. Rather, "Sense-perception, as made like to itself, has, while appearing to be brought to pass by means of an influence working on it, brought to pass the identity of itself and its object."[34] Hegel continues:

> After the perceptive faculty has received the impression, it abrogates the passivity, and remains thenceforth free from it. The soul therefore changes the form of the external body into its own, and is identical with an abstract quality such as this, for the sole reason that it itself is this universal form. . . . Sense-perception is simply the abrogation of this separation [between subject and object], it is that form of identity which abstracts from subjectivity and objectivity.[35]

Our aim here is not to wade into the broader debate about how to understand *De Anima*. What is relevant for us is the relationship suggested in *De Anima*, with which Marx was deeply familiar, between epistemic access to the world and the interactive metaphysical oneness of a perceiving subject with the world as its object. Hegel challenged readings of Aristotle on which sense-perception was a question of active form and passive, inert matter, presenting in their stead a picture on which the activity of form produces activity in matter, so that the sense-organ is "like" its object and the body is "like" its soul in the sense that they are unified in an interactive process—one in which each acts upon, and is acted upon by, the other.

Hegel's dialectical idealist rendering of *De Anima*'s account of sense-perception emphasized the active role of matter, yet gave pride of causal place to form, the *idea*. Marx—never one to leave Hegel standing on his head

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when he could set him on his feet—incorporated into his own epistemology this notion of a mutual interaction between subject and object that forges an identity between them, rendering the objective, external world truly knowable to the human mind. For Marx, however, the dialectical interaction between mind and world that produces this happy outcome is precipitated not by abstract, universal forms acting upon human senses, themselves in attitudes of what would be initially passive contemplation.[36] Rather, it is an outcome produced by labor—human social activity directed toward satisfying one's needs through material interaction with the world outside oneself. Through this process, we humanize the world *and ourselves*, forging a unity between the two that both makes the world sensible and awakens our senses to the world.

While the few commentators who remark upon Marx's engagements with *De Anima* mostly do so to underscore Marx's neo-Aristotelian essentialism generally, in his "*Poiêsis, Praxis, Aisthesis*," Henry Pickford gives sustained attention to what we might learn about Marx's views on sense-perception by reading them alongside Aristotle's discussion of sense-perception in *De Anima*. Articulating what he casts as a [Walter] Benjaminian model of Marxist aesthetics, Pickford writes:

> If virtuous action presupposes phronetic perception of the moral salience of a particular situation in its particularity, then virtuous practical-political action too requires such phronetic perception, and this . . . model of Marxist *aisthêsis* is intended to cultivate the exercise and improvement of such perceptual capacities.[37]

The suggestion here is that Marx's conception of revolutionary activity is as a practice that transforms and refines the human faculty of perception (*aisthêsis*), allowing the normative dimensions of human social life to be apprehended more immediately and, as a result, responded to both more spontaneously and more appropriately.[38]

Let us return to the passage from "Private Property and Labor" which we addressed earlier. There, Marx writes that to overcome the institution of private property is also to bring about the "emancipation of all human senses." He continues:

> Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty

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> of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) either cultivated or brought into being. For not only the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, *human* sense, the human nature of the senses, comes to be by virtue of its object, by virtue of *humanised* nature. The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present. . . . The dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense. Thus, the objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man's *sense human*, as well as to create the *human sense* corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.[39]

Marx's interest in ways of seeing, and their implications for our epistemic access to the world as it is, appears in his early writings and persists into his later work. In *Capital*, these themes are central in Marx's presentation of the concept of "commodity fetishism," a phenomenon in which things appear endowed with agency and independence that they do not have. Marx writes,

> It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, every-day thing, wood.[40]

Marx makes rather quick work here of discussing the relationships among form, matter, and function. What he takes to be the interesting problem is not that matter can take this form or that, but rather, that *qua* commodity, the object enters into relationships that are utterly indifferent to the thing as it *is*: indifferent to its form, material, or function. Marx continues,

> The products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different

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> with commodities. There, the existence of the things *qua* commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom.[41]

The infinitely myriad forms in which matter appears—all of the forms in which matter can be *made* to appear through the exercise of human labor—are elided in a single form that predominates in capitalist society and submerges all specificity and difference: the commodity-form. Because the activity of human labor is organized privately as the work of competing individuals or businesses and corporations, only the products of labor seem to interact and to express universality, and then, only when taken to market. Never mind that their universality—expressed as a universal exchangeability indifferent to their specific qualities—is only a kind of shadow of the universality of labor as essential human activity, expressed in definite moments, circumstances, and ways. Marx writes,

> Let us now picture to ourselves, by way of change, a community of free individuals, carrying on their work with the means of production in common, in which the labour power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour power of the community . . . The life-process of society, which is based on the process of material production, does not strip off its mystical veil until it is treated as production by freely associated men, and is consciously regulated by them in accordance with a settled plan.[42]

In such a society, human beings would recognize their products as the outcome of their own practical activity; activity which could be regulated, redirected, and organized in conscious collaboration among all the members of society.

There is a temptation, here, that I will warn against. It is particularly seductive for those who approach Marxism from a mainly philosophical or otherwise theoretical angle. Metaphors of seeing, sense, and recognition—while true to Marx's conceptual schema—can easily incline one toward an *idealist* rendering of Marx's approach to morality. Perhaps, one might think, we can "see" right now, today, what specific sorts of action would be called for in a future communist society. If only we can rationally deduce the right communist principle, maybe theory can fit us today with the eyes of tomorrow.

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This is, of course, exactly what Marx denies. He concludes the passage above by reminding his reader that the conditions under which society can "strip off its mystical veil" obtain only with the emergence of "a certain material ground-work or set of conditions of existence which in their turn are the spontaneous product of a long and painful process of development."[43] We might be reminded again of Marx's and Engels's earlier insistence that "for the success of the cause itself, the alteration of men on a mass scale is necessary, an alteration which can only take place in a practical movement, a revolution."[44] The only way to "create an appropriate human sense for the whole of the wealth of humanity and of nature" is to overcome the alienation of capitalist production and to successfully, and for the first time, usher in a self-conscious and truly human history. Philosophical problems can be represented abstractly in thought, but they cannot be solved there.

Should we then say that Marx's theory is itself totally without moral content or relevance because it presages a world without appeal to moral principle, as such? No. Such a world is not yet our world. Here, there remains much work to be done in order to do away with the alienation and economic exploitation that stifle human flourishing and solidarity. We cannot "think" ourselves into a form of consciousness that emerges only on the basis of social relations that do not yet exist.

We can, however, align ourselves with working people's struggles for freedom and human survival, today. Workers' struggles to resist and overthrow capitalist domination contain the germ of human emancipation. Thus, from the standpoint of workers under capitalism, morality is not an abstraction separate from class interest.[45] It both exists as an external command for the ruling classes, whose class interest disinclines them to follow it, and is already abolished as an external, alien command for those whose position is such that they cannot free themselves without freeing all of humanity, as well. This is an inner contradiction of capitalist society that can be resolved only once the highest moral imperative for human beings today is achieved: to secure the victory of working people over capital.

Progress and Perfectibility

Morality implies human imperfection. We engage in abstract moral reasoning largely because if we don't, we are more likely than not to get things wrong about how we ought to treat one another. One tradition of moral

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thought asks us to imagine human beings better than ourselves and to act as they would. Thus, for Aristotle, the figure of the *phronimos* is a practically wise being, one who acts well because they have been well brought up. Immanuel Kant proposes a similar thought experiment as a resource for moral guidance: we ask ourselves, what would we do if we lived in a "Realm of Ends," a condition in which everyone acted according to universal laws that they can will to others as maxims? We imagine creatures better than ourselves and seek to emulate them. But what if we could make ourselves into those better creatures? They do not imagine better selves and seek to emulate those in an infinite regress of moral imagination. They simply act in prosocial ways, as it is in their nature to do. They apprehend the objective world and act appropriately within it. As the early Marx might have put it, and the mature Marx would have agreed, "The senses . . . become theoreticians in their immediate praxis."

What makes Marx's approach importantly distinct is not that he thinks morality has validity only for those conditions in which there is no mutual recognition of one another's humanity and in which the world is not already arranged in a manner conducive to the universal satisfaction of human needs. This, he has in common with other moral theorists before and after him.[46] What makes Marx's view distinct is the claim that such conditions need not be a mere hypothetical dream. They are features of a world that can be achieved.

Marx's perfectionism is perhaps one of the most easily misunderstood aspects of his theory; it is, for example, what leads some to caricature his Hegelianism, suggesting that communism represents a kind of proletarian-inflected "end of history." It's not even clear that the "end of history" implies stasis of the sort often attributed to Hegel. But as far as understanding Marx, such caricatures overlook that far from announcing the end of history, Marx's theory heralds the possibility for a truly human history of conscious, open-ended, creative transformation to begin. This is what is meant when Marx says of bourgeois society, "The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation."[47] The human nature Marx would see perfected is labor itself—an inherently dynamic and ever-developing process of creation and self-changing.[48] There is no sense in which Marx can be understood as imagining that communism would bring human history to a close.

Critics who wonder whether the kinds of naturalized and habitual forms of prosocial human behavior Marx imagines for communist society could

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ever take place are quite right to point out that a human being is neither an angel nor a saint, nor could she be. But Marx's theory requires neither that she be nor that she become so. A human being is a natural being who, through socially mediated activity, is capable of intervening into her own nature so that it is her own product. Through the activity of labor, she can practically relate to her nature not as a fixed, given, and alien object but as her own concretized subjectivity. And this is made fully possible only through a process that brings about the social production of the human species as its own object on a grand scale, one with a shared intersubjectivity that creates the possibility of universal and objective consciousness about the natural and social world within which human beings intervene.

Marx holds out the possibility that when human beings alter their society to do away with the exploitation and degradation of human beings, they will also effect an alteration so profound that it will make prosocial forms of human interaction habitual, customary, and natural. If that is so, then it is not quite so puzzling why he would accept the charge that communism abolishes morality.

Such a world would be one in which universal human solidarity would be "no mere phrase" with us, "but a fact of life."[49] This in no way entails an end to obstacles, to divergent opinion, to all suffering, or to negotiation among various and conflicting individual perspectives. It does herald a world of people for whom the injunction to treat their fellow human beings as though they are ends in themselves is no more or less necessary than enjoining one's heart to beat.

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