

interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

volume 5/3

spring 1976

page

247	hilail gildin	revolution and the formation of political society in the <i>social contract</i>
266	peter stern	marx's critique of philosophy
288	kirk emmert	winston churchill on empire and the limits of politics
309	laurence berns	political philosophy and the right to rebellion



martinus nijhoff, the hague

edited at

queens college of the city university
of new york

interpretation

a journal of political philosophy

volume 5

issue 3

editors

seth g. benardete – hilail gildin – robert horwitz – howard b. white (1912–1974)

consulting editors

john hallowell – wilhelm hennis – erich hula – arnaldo momigliano – michael oakeshott – leo strauss (1899–1973) – kenneth w. thompson

executive editor

hilail gildin

managing editor

ann mcardle

interpretation is a journal devoted to the study of political philosophy. it appears three times a year.

its editors welcome contributions from all those who take a serious interest in political philosophy regardless of their orientation.

all manuscripts and editorial correspondence should be addressed to the executive editor

interpretation

building g101 – queens college – flushing, n.y. 11367 – u.s.a.

subscription price

for institutions and libraries Guilders 42. for individuals Guilders 33.50.
forwarding expenses Guilders 9.— one guilder = \$ 0.385
subscription and correspondence in connection therewith should be sent to the publisher

martinus nijhoff

9–11 lange voorhout – p.o.b. 269 – the hague – netherlands.

MARX'S CRITIQUE OF PHILOSOPHY

PETER STERN

for Jean

For Marx, philosophy is both an expression of and a cause of man's alienation. It is an expression of alienation because it is necessarily based on the empirical divorce of man's productive life from his spiritual life. Philosophy reflects this divorce as it arbitrarily posits a spiritual world that is totally distinct from the real, empirical world of men, thus giving an ontological significance to man's social limitations without realizing that that is what it is doing. Having projected a pure world of spirit, philosophy then evaluates man from its self-generated spiritual standpoint, ignoring, minimizing, and even deprecating man's real, material productivity and all the relations that derive from it. For Marx, however, the philosopher's spiritual world is a fantasy. It is a product of the philosopher's need to overestimate the power and importance of thought. Thus the philosopher's entire procedure is grounded on his mistaken assumption that there is a pure domain of thought against which everything that actually exists empirically is measured and found wanting.

This critique suggests that Marx's argument is directed exclusively against idealist philosophy and that what he is aiming at is a simple return to materialism. This impression, however, is only partially correct. For while Marx demands a recognition of the truth of materialism, he is also quick to point out its limitations. Materialism is insufficient for two reasons: first, it ignores the active side of man's productive powers; and second, it tends to exempt itself from its own materialist premise. Thus Marx's critique is directed against both materialism and idealism from an entirely new standpoint, which Marx calls naturalism. Marx's naturalist doctrine is meant to combine the partial truth of both idealism and materialism, a truth which is obscured when either position is taken to the exclusion of the other. Thus Marx's naturalism incorporates idealism's emphasis on man's free spontaneity and materialism's emphasis on the primacy of the material conditions of life. By preserving the truth of both idealism and materialism, Marx claims not only to overcome the onesidedness of each, but also to overcome the limitations of all philosophy as such. It is this aim which represents the underlying ground and the real driving force of all Marx's critical endeavors. For Marx, the philosophical standpoint itself is deficient and must, therefore, be transcended. Yet this transcendence is no simple abolition or annihilation; rather, it incorporates

and hence preserves the positive achievements of philosophy by realizing them in the actual behavior of men and the organization of their societies. Still, however complicated and subtle Marx's conception of this transcendence may be, the really important point and the striking fact is that Marx believes that philosophy as such must be abandoned.

Having grasped the limitations of philosophical thought, Marx launches into a critique of philosophy so filled with contempt and ridicule that even Nietzsche's attacks sometimes seem mild by comparison. This hostility derives not only from Marx's belief that he has discovered the root errors of philosophy but also from his annoyance with what he takes to be the philosopher's typically haughty and pompous attitude toward the realm of worldly affairs, that is, the realm of the non-philosophers. Marx relentlessly attacks the philosopher's condescending stance, and tries to make him appear completely ridiculous. Marx's own tone, which unfailingly conveys the sense that philosophy is ridiculous and absurd, is as telling as his actual arguments themselves. Thus in the last analysis, what provokes Marx's contempt is his exasperation with the professional knower's arrogant and inflated assertions that he possesses superior knowledge, for the philosopher, the man who makes the greatest claims to know, remains fundamentally ignorant concerning himself, his activity, and the conditions which make his activity possible.

The philosopher's ignorance is rooted in his misunderstanding of the importance of history and production. The philosopher never pays sufficient attention to the fact that the development of society and men's ideas about society depends, above all, upon the level of development of the productive forces. It is the productive forces which, it is important to note, [necessarily expand as history develops, which establish the horizon in which thinking and acting are possible because they provide the concrete means whereby men experience and become aware of the degree of their freedom and power, both in relation to other men and in relation to nature. Thus because the philosopher abstracts from the world of history and production, he fails to see how he is inextricably a product of both. Moreover, it is only because philosophers have minimized the importance of these two factors that they feel free to turn away from the realm of human affairs toward a world of pure reason, which is taken to be both independent of empirical reality and the true source of meaning and guidance. Yet this ideal world is not autonomous. Rather, it is a product of men who think and act only within a specific set of historical conditions which depend upon the level of development of the productive forces and which evolve independent of men's will. Thus it is the autonomy of the productive forces which ultimately accounts for the limitations of philosophical thought, for regardless of how philosophers interpret the world, it continues to evolve in its own way according to its own set of

laws. Thus, interestingly enough, like the philosopher, Marx also believes in an autonomous world, but for Marx it is not the world of pure ideas but the world of man's material production.

Seen in this respect, the philosopher's work is no different from any other kind of work, for the "production of ideas, of conceptions of consciousness is directly interwoven with the material activity and the material relationships of men. . . ."¹ Having discovered the true significance of production, Marx claims to overcome the central illusion of philosophy, namely, that thought can be divorced from its social, economic, and historical context. Marx's new interpretation of thought corrects this mistake, for it is based on the assumption that "conceiving, thinking, and the intellectual relationships of men appear as the direct result of their material behavior."² This is so because man is inextricably embedded, in all essential respects, within the material conditions of life; thus his ideas are always ideas about his needs and the conditions which will satisfy his needs. Because man is essentially a creature of need, thought remains circumscribed by the reality of needs and the possibilities of satisfying them.

The relationship between man's thought and his empirical conditions is summarized most succinctly in the following formulation in the *German Ideology*: "Consciousness does not determine life but life determines consciousness."³ The difference between these two conceptions is as follows: "In the first view, the starting point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second, it is the real individuals themselves as they exist in real life, and consciousness is considered only as *their* consciousness."⁴

This somewhat awkward passage is again meant to stress the importance of man's needs. Here, however, a more general reason for its importance is given: man is a being whose primary concern is life; hence the reality of life possesses a significance which can never be surpassed. Only after this elementary fact is given its proper recognition does the significance of another aspect of man's existence arise, namely, that man also possesses consciousness. Consciousness is thus but one aspect of a being whose most basic condition is life. Consciousness, therefore, is never wholly free; it is always "burdened"⁵ with the prior necessity of maintaining life. Thus, to say that consciousness determines life requires, in effect, a total abstraction from life, for consciousness then becomes the sole defining characteristic of man. The true recognition of the reality of life necessarily implies that life is

¹ Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (Garden City, N.Y., 1967), p. 414.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 421.

the overriding reality that determines man's condition. Thus what controls consciousness and reveals its ontological limitation is life, the "actual life process of men"⁶ as they produce together to sustain this process. This recognition then becomes, in turn, the true foundation for philosophy.

According to Marx, the immediate cause of the split between consciousness and life is the division of labor. In fact, the division of labor arises only as the separation between mental and material labor becomes definitive. Once this division has been established, consciousness divorces itself from its roots in material reality and comes to interpret itself as being independent of all empirical factors. In doing this, it unconsciously inverts the true relations between thought and reality: pure thought becomes the true world, and the real world becomes the world of mere appearances. With the division of labor, "consciousness can really boast of being something other than consciousness of existing practice, of really representing something without representing something real."⁷

Because of philosophy's tendency to abstract from empirical reality, Marx equates philosophy with religion. For both posit an ideal realm which is the source of everything that appears empirically, including those things which are actually done by man. Since this realm is understood to be beyond man's control, it becomes an object of worship which necessarily degrades man, for he is forced to construe the results of his own activity as a product of a higher being who is both unknown and autonomous. Thus man becomes enslaved by his own activity: he attributes everything of value to thought or to God and nothing to himself.

In the section of the *Holy Family* called "The Mystery of Speculative Construction," Marx parodies the religious way in which philosophy inevitably interprets everyday life. To illustrate his point, he constructs what he takes to be a typically philosophical analysis of a familiar object of daily experience, in this case, a piece of fruit.

This philosopher begins his analysis by forming the idea "the fruit" from the variety of fruits that he habitually comes in contact with. For the philosopher, the essential thing about these different fruits is that they are all regarded as being merely the phenomenal forms of the idea "the fruit," which, in contrast to the idea, have no real reality. "The actual fruits," says Marx, "are taken to be only apparent fruits whose true essence is the 'Substance,' 'the fruit.'"⁸

After having constructed the idea "the fruit," the philosopher then tries to explain how the variety of actual fruits can appear as products of a single abstract idea. The philosopher solves this dilemma by inter-

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 415.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 423.

⁸ "The Holy Family," in *ibid.*, p. 370.

preting the Idea as a "self-differentiated, dynamic"⁹ movement which generates from itself, as an inner process, the full diversity of all particular fruits. Thus the ideal fruit is conceived as containing the totality of all actual fruits. To make this process more plausible, it helps if we regard the idea as undergoing a continual process of "incarnation"¹⁰ in each individual fruit. A miracle is thus created: all real, actual, naturally produced, and naturally existing fruits appear as the product of "an unreal creature of the understanding, 'the fruit.'"¹¹ Each fruit manifests itself only as "'the fruit' posits itself as pear as apple";¹² consequently, "in the apple, 'the fruit' gives itself an apple existence, in the pear, a peary existence."¹³

The upshot of this speculative procedure, and the really serious point that Marx means to make here, is that by regarding the whole of the empirical world as being essentially products of the Idea, philosophy endows man's actually existing world with a mystical quality because he is forced to "construe as absolutely necessary and universal"¹⁴ all that is merely accidental and transient, thereby producing "the most unreasonable and unnatural subservience to the object."¹⁵ In other words, the ironic consequence of the philosopher's method is that although he starts with the premise that thought is independent of empirical reality, he necessarily ends his speculation totally *dependent* on this reality because he is forced to explain everything empirical as an inevitable result of the Idea, with the consequence that he is incapable of imagining that the world could be otherwise. In this way, the philosopher helps preserve the status quo; by explaining the world as a product of thought, he becomes its unconscious apologist and spokesman.

Nevertheless, despite the philosopher's fundamental errors and deceptions, he still may serve a useful function, for, as an alienated expression of the real world, he unconsciously reflects certain truths about the world, albeit in a confused and misleading way, since he grounds his insights not on man's activity but on the activity of a divine, transcendental subject. Thus, if the philosopher's work is taken out of its abstract form and translated back into the language of man's real material interests, his insights can be salvaged. Marx says of Hegel, for instance, that he "very often given an *actual* presentation, a presentation of the *matter* itself, within his speculative presentation."¹⁶ Marx goes on to say that Hegel is so mystifying because the reader takes the speculative account for the true account:

⁹ Ibid., p. 370.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 371.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 372.

¹² Ibid., p. 371.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 374.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 373.

that is, he attributes the quality of being real to Hegel's speculative, abstract Subject and regards the actual subject, namely, man, as something unreal. Philosophical problems can be resolved, therefore, simply by discarding the philosopher's initial speculative assumptions which assert the primacy of some ideal subject, thus obscuring thought's true origin and referent, empirical reality.

This transition from speculation to empiricism is at the same time the transition from error to knowledge, from philosophy to science. In the *German Ideology*, Marx describes this transition: "Where speculation ends, namely in actual life, there real positive science begins as the representation of the practical activity and practical process of the development of men. Phrases about consciousness cease and real knowledge takes their place. With the description of reality, independent philosophy loses its medium of existence."¹⁷

Marx goes on to offer several examples of how a philosophical problem is resolved by turning to empirical reality. In his discussion of the controversy over whether the relationship of man to nature is one of harmony or discord, he says that this theoretical problem "collapses when we understand the celebrated unity of man and nature has always existed in varying forms in every epoch according to the lesser or greater development of industry just like the 'struggle' of man with nature right up to the development of his productive forces on a corresponding basis."¹⁸ Yet philosophy mistakenly speaks "of the antithesis of man and nature as if these were two separate 'things' and man did not always have before him a historical nature and a natural history. . . ."¹⁹

Another instance of how a theoretical problem is resolved by looking to social practice occurs in one of Marx's discussions in the *German Ideology* of the problem of alienation. This problem, which is "so baffling to German theoreticians,"²⁰ can be easily solved simply by abolishing private property, for since the institution of private property is the primary cause of man's alienation, once private property is abolished, alienation will disappear. In other words, alienation will cease to baffle German philosophers for the simple reason that men will no longer be alienated.

Thus for Marx man's theoretical perplexities arise only on the basis of an empirical situation which fails to fully realize man's essential being. The philosopher's theoretical problems merely reflect the non-philosopher's practical problems. A solution to the practical problem necessarily resolves the theoretical problem as well. The crucial premise which forms the basis for Marx's empiricism, therefore, is not only that philosophy is abstract, but also that all man's

¹⁷ "The German Ideology," p. 415.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 426.

practical problems can be solved. It is important to underscore this point, for the significance of this premise and the justification for Marx's turn to empiricism is very revealing and is generally overlooked. His point—that all man's practical problems can be solved—is startling in its simplicity, and its radicalness, no doubt, is what accounts for its being generally ignored. Yet its role in the overall import of Marx's thought is decisive, for it highlights the Promethean spirit that animates all Marx's work, and it indicates, as well, the general limitations of his thought. For the idea that man can perfectly control his worldly environment is not only altogether fantastic, it is also not at all empirical, for the validity of this thesis can never be established from observation. It can only emerge on the basis of speculation, which Marx has already thoroughly discredited.

In any event, for Marx, the discovery of the root errors of philosophy leads to the abolition of philosophy. According to Marx, philosophy comes to an end for three reasons: first, because it deals only with its own self-created world of illusion; second, because on the other hand, as a purely theoretical study of man, philosophy has achieved its goal of absolute knowledge; and third, because once having gained this knowledge, philosophy finds its true realization in practice.

Philosophy comes to an end, therefore, for three contradictory reasons. On the one hand, Marx emphasizes that philosophy comes to an end because it is fundamentally incapable of arriving at the truth, and, on the other hand, he emphasizes that philosophy comes to an end because, indeed, it has grasped the truth. This contradiction is never really resolved by Marx, yet it is of great importance, for, like his assertion that all problems can be solved, it again underscores the inherent limitations of Marx's critique. The problem is always that in order to deny that philosophy can arrive at absolute truth, one first needs an absolute philosophy that can prove such a denial. The full scope of this problem emerges only when what is at issue is not the truth of any one philosophy but the truth of philosophy as such. What distinguishes Marx's critique in this regard from other such radical challenges is precisely that he denies that philosophy can gain the truth, and yet claims that he is himself in possession of that truth.

Marx does attempt at least a partial resolution of this dilemma by arguing that the true realization of philosophy is found not in theoretical knowledge but in social practice. By acknowledging the success and yet, at the same time, the limits of pure theory, and, conversely, by recognizing the importance of man's practical activities and the true extent of his species powers, philosophy can be incorporated into practice and can become reconciled with itself and the world. Still, despite this resolution, which in part preserves the importance of philosophy, the crucial point remains: philosophy as traditionally understood must be abolished.

Thus the main thrust of Marx's critique never changes: philosophy is

limited because it deals with knowledge divorced from its roots in practice. The most a philosopher can do, therefore, is to try to produce a correct *awareness* of existing conditions; he can never actually change them. This, says Marx, "goes as far as a theorist possibly can go without ceasing to be a theorist and philosopher."²¹ Because of the scope and centrality of man's productive powers, knowledge for its own sake, which is the *raison d'être* of philosophy, can never be man's ultimate aim.

The final reason why philosophy comes to an end, therefore, is that knowledge cannot be the ultimate goal of man, for the knowledge man gains in theory must be used to change the world in practice. What underlies what we have called Marx's empiricism is his belief that the full truth about man must become completely manifest in the real world of everyday life. Because man's essence ultimately coincides with his existence, what man's essence is will no longer be a matter for speculation: it will become clear to all. A legitimate need for speculation exists only as long as man's nature is not empirically known. It was the earlier absence of empirical fulfillment that provoked man's wonder and desire to know. Thus in the final communist society, where man's true being will for the first time make its phenomenal appearance, practice becomes the mode by which man's true essence is revealed. Marx says, for example, that "communism is for us not a state of affairs still to be established, not an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of affairs."²²

This is spelled out further in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* where it is stated that "It (communism) is the genuine resolution of the antagonism between man and man; it is the true resolution of the conflict between existence and essence, objectification and self-affirmation, freedom and necessity, individual and species. It is the riddle of history solved and knows itself as this solution."²³

All this lies behind Marx's famous last thesis in his *Theses on Feuerbach*: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it."²⁴ And yet, the irony of the original paradox of Marx's critique of philosophy and his resolution of the split between theory and practice remains, for Marx's empiricism necessarily depends upon the prior philosophical assumption that man's existence will correspond to his essence, since the realm of immediate experience does not automatically reveal this. Marx believed that the errors of abstraction could be overcome by turning to empirical reality, that which truly and unambiguously is. But since empirical reality does not immediately disclose its own meaning, man

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 426.

²³ "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)," in *ibid.*, p. 304.

²⁴ "Theses on Feuerbach," in *ibid.*, p. 401.

needs theory or theoretical assumptions to grasp this meaning. In other words, a simple return to empiricism is impossible. Marx himself admits as much in the first manuscript of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*. There he makes the point that theory must grasp the true inner development of reality because this development is not immediately given. But having made this admission, he then minimizes or dismisses its significance because he is certain that he is in possession of the true philosophical method. It was on the basis of this belief, and, moreover, on the basis of the belief that empirical reality would, by itself, disclose the full truth about man that he said that he had settled his accounts with his philosophical conscience and had therefore turned to his scientific study of capitalism.

II

Marx developed this critique of philosophy in his study of Hegel, the Young Hegelians, Feuerbach, and the bourgeois political economists. His thought, in part, is meant to be a synthesis of all of them, seeing through their limitations and preserving their positive contributions. This aim highlights one of the striking facts about Marx's work—namely, that although he remained fundamentally opposed to these thinkers, he nevertheless gained important insights from them which he more or less freely acknowledged. It has been said that Marx's achievement lies more in his capacity to bring together ideas that were already current than in any discovery of wholly new ideas. While it is difficult to make a final judgment on this matter—since the principle of synthesis, which is doubtless the most important thing, does seem to be entirely new—it is certainly clear that Marx was deeply indebted to the thinkers he opposed, and this is particularly true in the field of philosophy. There, the two most important influences on Marx's thinking were Hegel and Feuerbach, and we will now turn to Marx's critique of their thought, which concentrates, by definition, on their limitations, but which also brings out certain positive contributions as well.

According to Marx, all the mistakes of Hegelian philosophy are rooted in the fact that Hegel begins his philosophy with an abstraction and thus can only end or conclude with a greater one. By defining man in terms of spirit, Hegel abstracts from the importance of man's practical activity and his natural environment, thereby misinterpreting man, his essential activity, the nature of the objective world, and the affirmation man gains in relation to this world.

Hegel's initial error, then, is that he conceives man primarily as self-consciousness. The only self which Hegel recognizes, therefore, is an abstract self totally divorced from all real determinate aspects of actual life, and the only activity that he recognizes is the activity of

thinking, for thinking is the most important act that consciousness performs since it establishes the greatest certainty of reality through the possibility of acquiring absolute knowledge: "The way in which consciousness is and the way in which something is for it is knowing. Knowing is its only act. Hence something comes to exist for consciousness in so far as consciousness knows that something."²⁵

But although Hegel mistakenly defines man in terms of self-consciousness, thereby falsely elevating speculative thought over all other forms of experience, he still remains illuminating, for he understands that man is alienated and that he can develop himself only through a process of alienation. The insight that man is alienated is one of the three most important ideas that Marx acknowledges as having learned from Hegel (the other two being the notion of negation, which in part accounts for man's alienation, and the concept of man's self-development through history). Yet Marx fundamentally revises Hegel's understanding of alienation. For Hegel, man is alienated because all man's actual concrete, sensual relations are opposed to thought. All contradictions that Hegel perceives revolve around the "contradiction between abstract thinking and sensuous actuality."²⁶ Thus for Hegel, the point is not that man is alienated in his actual relations because they are not as they ought to be; rather, man's alienation arises as the whole domain of actuality itself exists in opposition to thought. Because Hegel understands man only in terms of self-consciousness, he never sees that alienation arises out of the contradictions within actuality itself. Thus although Hegel is profound in recognizing that man is alienated, he errs in his understanding of what that alienation ultimately consists of.

Hegel not only misunderstands what man is; he also misunderstands the nature of the external world in which man lives. Hegel interprets the world only as it is an object for thought. Marx emphasizes that, in one sense, Hegel continually misinterprets the world because he recognizes it only as it is incorporated within thought. The defect of this procedure is that in analyzing different objects, thought necessarily abstracts from the object its most important characteristic, namely, its sensuous actuality. Once within thought, the object is no longer the object "out there"; that is, the object is no longer regarded as a concrete, sensuous, external thing. Instead, it becomes an idea, a "thought entity."²⁷ One consequence of this denial of the sensuousness of the object is that in reflecting on the world Hegel attributes reality not to the world or to man's actual feelings and experiences in relation to the world, but only to those experiences as they are absorbed within thought. True experience therefore must always be mediated through

²⁵ "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)," p. 328.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 320.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

reflection; it is never inherent in the actual experience itself. In a famous passage in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, Marx says that the upshot of Hegel's method is that "my authentic religious existence is my existence in *philosophy of religion*, my authentic political existence is my existence in *philosophy of law*, my authentic natural existence is my existence in *philosophy of nature*, my authentic aesthetic existence is my existence in *philosophy of art*, and my authentic human existence is my existence in philosophy."²⁸

The main point that Marx makes against Hegel, however, is not that Hegel sees the objective world only as it is an object *for* thought, but that Hegel understands the sensuous world as being essentially a product *of* thought, and that hence what it really is, in its essence, is thought or spirit, something that is non-natural and non-objective. For Hegel, the real, material, sensuous external world is actually thought establishing itself "as object."²⁹ Thus, the sensuous objectivity of the world is "not to be understood here as self-externalizing sensuousness open to the light and to the sensibility of sensuous man."³⁰ On the contrary, sensuous reality is conceived as "objectified self-consciousness, self-consciousness as object."³¹

In one sense, this account clearly contradicts Marx's earlier statement that Hegel sees the world only as it is reflected in thought, for here he implies that indeed Hegel does grasp the significance of the world's material aspect, since he recognizes that this aspect is something other than thought. The thrust of this part of Marx's criticism, then, is directed against another characteristic Hegelian failing. It is not so much that thought fails to recognize materiality as that, when it does, it denies it by interpreting it as a "product of abstract spirit and hence phases of mind."³² In other words, thought ultimately interprets the world as an aspect of itself. The motive behind what is in effect Hegel's spiritual interpretation of nature is the need or desire for unity or reconciliation. For since thought regards everything other than itself as something alien, the overcoming of its alienation requires that it deny everything that is other than itself. Because Hegel views nature exclusively from the standpoint of thought, he can understand it only as "externalization, error, a defect which ought not to be."³³ For Hegel, nature as nature is necessarily something deficient: "Hegel makes the externality of nature, its contrast to thought, its defect. And as much as nature is distinct from abstraction it is something defective. Something which is defective not only for me in my eyes but also in itself has something which it lacks."³⁴

²⁸ Ibid., p. 330.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 323.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 336.

³¹ Ibid., p. 332.

³² Ibid., p. 320.

³³ Ibid., p. 336.

³⁴ Ibid.

Because Hegel misunderstands the nature of the object and the nature of the subject, he also misunderstands the process of affirmation and transcendence by the subject. The transcendence of the object arises when the object is seen as an externalization of thought. Thus the affirmation of the object depends upon a negation of the object as object: what is affirmed in the object is not its objectivity but its spirituality. Thus, says Marx, the object appears to consciousness as something "vanishing."³⁵ The annihilation of the object, the fact that it "vanishes," represents an affirmation of consciousness because it reveals to consciousness that the object is actually itself in its own otherness. Thus the transcendence of the object depends, above all, on its being denied as a sensuous, external thing that is independent of consciousness. Consciousness interprets the negation of the object positively, for it can then claim that it "knows the non-existence of the distinction between the object and itself."³⁶

Thus Hegel's speculative affirmation is abstract and unreal, for it never affirms the real, empirical world as it actually is. Hegel can only affirm the world as he denies it: "transcendence, therefore, has a special role in which denial and preservation, denial and affirmation, are bound together."³⁷ In this respect, Hegel's transcendence of the object comes at the expense of both the object and the common-sense, everyday, first-hand experience of the object. Marx draws out this consequence in these words: "In this respect he [Hegel] thus opposes both the *actual* nature of the object and the immediate unphilosophical knowledge—the unphilosophical concepts—of that nature. He therefore contradicts conventional *concepts*."³⁸

Yet there is another aspect of Hegel's notion of transcendence that Marx finds even more disturbing; namely, that Hegel affirms the unreasonable world of the status quo. Although Marx had previously argued that Hegel's affirmation of the world is entirely spurious because it is based on thought's negation of the object, Marx concedes that looked at from another point of view Hegel does, indeed, affirm the actual world; however, it is a world which is irrational. Hegel is able to effect this affirmation because, having recognized the world as the externalization of thought, he believes that whatever exists represents a legitimate phase in the development of mind. This process of legitimation of affirmation takes place in two steps; first, consciousness "claims to be immediately the *other* of itself, sensibility, actuality, life."³⁹ Consciousness claims to have transcended actuality and life, for it recognizes that the essence of both is consciousness itself in another mode; hence neither can be alien to it. In the second step,

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 324.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 329.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 331.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 328.

having transcended actuality and life in this manner, consciousness then claims that it "reabsorbs this externalization and objectivity and thus is at one with itself in its other being as such."⁴⁰ In other words, consciousness negates and thus transcends the object, and then, having transcended it, consciousness "re-establishes"⁴¹ the object, thereby affirming it as it actually is in its empirical form. The Hegelian process of affirmation ends, therefore, with the assertion that the world is as it ought to be. Thus Hegel's concept of transcendence leads to the strange doctrine that we must accept the world without change, exactly as it is.

Marx attacks this notion because it legitimates a status quo which still deprives man of his freedom. Contained in Hegel's concept of transcendence is "the root of Hegel's false positivism or of his merely *apparent* criticism."⁴² For although Hegel claims to have transcended man's alienation, Marx argues that the very opposite is the case: Hegel not only fails to transcend man's alienation, he actually confirms it. By asserting that the world is the embodiment of the idea, Hegel says, in effect, that the world has become completely rational. Moreover, by claiming that the world is a product of thought, he blurs the distinction between the actual and the ideal, thus destroying the standards that serve as the basis for worldly criticism. In discovering that the world is really spirit in its otherness, Hegel justifies this otherness, which turns out to be, when translated into the language of man's worldly relations, a condition of alienation and injustice that can still be overcome. This consequence of Hegel's thought is inevitable, since by presenting the process of transcendence as a process of thought, Hegel discourages all activity that would lead to real political change. Thus Hegel's concept of transcendence is entirely abstract: it consists of thought's transcendence, not of the world, which would be impossible anyway, but of itself in its various interpretations of the world.

Arguing along these lines, Marx reveals the hidden way in which Hegel reconciles himself with his own conflict-ridden world. From this aspect of Hegel's thought, all conventional concepts receive their "ultimate justification."⁴³ Although Marx had argued earlier that Hegel contradicted commonsense opinion, since he elevated philosophical reflection at the expense of immediate experience, he concludes that the real effect of Hegel's philosophy is to confirm commonsense opinion. Thus Marx ends this part of his analysis with the following words: "There can thus no longer be any question about Hegel's accommodation in regard to religion, the state, etc., since this lie is the lie of his principle."⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid., p. 329.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 331.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 329.

Having shown that Hegel's method begins and ends in an abstraction which actually serves to confirm man's real alienation, Marx concludes his reflections with a critique of Hegel's concept of intuition. Intuition becomes all-important for Hegel because at the culmination of his system he comes to realize that the absolute idea is merely pure thought divorced from any real content. It is thus a pure abstraction and hence a "nothing."⁴⁵ In order to give the idea substantiality, Hegel turns to nature, for it alone has real, determinate reality. This turn to nature explains Hegel's transition from abstract thinking to intuition, which is in effect his turn from *The Logic* to his *Philosophy of Nature*. Having become aware of his own abstractness, Hegel must "abandon"⁴⁶ speculation and "decide"⁴⁷ on a new method of inquiry, namely, intuition. Yet this turn to intuition is not only based on thought's awareness of its own limitation; it is also motivated by a kind of mystical sense which Marx says is really nothing more than a feeling of boredom. "The mystical feeling which drives a philosopher from abstract thinking to intuition is boredom, the longing for a content."⁴⁸

Yet the abstract philosopher's desire for concreteness can never be satisfied through intuition, for the nature he intuits is still abstract because it is conceived as being isolated from man, and because it is still understood only as an externalization of thought—with the difference, however, that now the sensuous quality of nature is given recognition. But this recognition is incomplete, for nature's sensuous qualities are understood only as they repeat, albeit in a different mode, the movement of thought. Thus the philosopher's turn to intuition only confirms his original abstraction; it is merely "his conscious re-enactment of the process of producing his abstraction."⁴⁹ According to Marx, Hegel is unable to break out of his world of abstraction. Even his turn to intuition fails: rather than grasping the externality of nature in its own right, he understands it only in relation to thought. Hence it remains a "nothing, a nothing proving itself to be nothing."⁵⁰

Marx calls the true philosophy, the one which resolves Hegel's speculative mysteries and obfuscations, naturalism. Marx draws three important conclusions from his naturalist premise. The first is that man has active, natural, objective capacities through which he creates or produces things which are essential to him because they satisfy his needs. As such, they are not simply another part of the objective world; both their establishment and their being serve as objective confirmations of man. Thus Marx argues, against Hegel, that man's natural

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 333.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 334.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 335.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 336.

productivity is wholly in keeping with, and actually is an affirmation of, his essential being. In fact, his affirmation comes only through production which satisfies his needs. Marx makes this clear in the following passage: "The fact that man is a *corporeal*, actual, sentient, objective being with natural capacities means that he has *actual, sensuous, objects* for his nature as objects of his life expression, or that he can only express his life in actual, sensuous objects."⁵¹

Man affirms himself through production because he is a being who lives essentially within the world of nature. Because Marx is not misguided by false speculative assumptions, he claims that he can and does remain faithful to the significance of nature and to man's productivity in relation to it. The mistake that Hegel makes is that he understands the relation between man and nature only in terms of opposition. Thus in order to resolve this opposition, he is compelled to deny the importance both of nature and of man's productivity. When this assumption of an opposition is removed, however, the true relation—which is a relation of harmony—is revealed, and the significance of the natural world and man's productivity is restored. Concerning the act of production, Marx says, for example, that "the establishing (of objects) is not the subject but the subjectivity of objective capacities whose action must therefore also be objective."⁵²

The second important consequence of Marx's naturalism is that nature is recognized both as an object which is independent of man and as a domain which is necessary for the satisfaction of man's needs. What Marx wants to emphasize here is that the independence of nature does not detract from man's essential freedom and dignity because he retains an important relation with nature, since despite its independence it is still necessary for the satisfaction of his needs. To the extent that it is, man's relation to it remains positive. Thus what establishes nature's affirmative significance for man, whatever other differences between man and nature there may be, is the fact that man needs nature. Because he does, his relation to nature is always affirmative.

The last important consequence that follows from Marx's naturalist doctrine is his assertion that nature establishes the possibility of relations between men since what they essentially have in common is the need to satisfy their natural wants. Moreover, these wants are not merely directed to the satisfaction of immediate biological necessities; they go beyond this domain to include a genuine need for others. Nature is thus the ultimate basis of man's sociality.

The full meaning of Marx's naturalist premise, however, is not exhausted by the enumeration of the above three points, for on reflection it becomes clearer that the final significance of Marx's naturalism is actually the very opposite of what it appears to be at

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁵² *Ibid.*

first glance. What becomes evident is that, in fact, Marx reverses the priority of nature and man: the really decisive point is not that man is a part of nature or that nature is essentially different from consciousness, but that man needs nature and that the reality of his need establishes the true meaning of nature. The fundamental fact is that because nature can be made to satisfy man's needs, it must be understood as being essentially created for him. Thus Marx's final point is that man transcends nature as it becomes the means through which he satisfies his needs.

Although Marx maintains that man is a part of nature and therefore affirms himself through his relation to it, he also asserts that man's immediate relation to nature is not affirmative and thus not yet human. This is because nature does not immediately act to satisfy man's needs. While man is a part of nature because he is a sensuous being and because nature is necessary for the satisfaction of his needs, this is not the final ground on which Marx's affirmation of man's relation to nature rests. For since nature does not immediately satisfy man's needs, in order for man to affirm himself through his relation to nature, he must first *overcome* his initial relation to it so that it will satisfy his needs. Thus the true relation to nature is a negative one, which, however, becomes positive as man's overcoming of nature increases. Man's affirmation of nature is actually based, therefore, on the fact that he overcomes nature through his labor.

Marx calls the totality of activities through which man overcomes nature history. History is man's natural "genetic act"⁵³ which, unlike all other natural processes, is "known and hence self-transcending."⁵⁴ The essential meaning of history, therefore, is that man has the capacity to transcend nature as it comes to satisfy more of man's needs on an ever-increasing scale. Through history, man has visible proof that nature exists essentially for the satisfaction of his needs. Moreover, according to Marx, the overcoming of nature can be brought to the point where nature will eventually satisfy all man's basic needs. At that point, history comes to an end. Thus the affirmation that man achieves in relation to nature is not a function of his being a part of nature, but of his being outside of nature in such a way that through production he can ultimately transcend nature completely. Through this transcendence, the truth concerning nature, man, and man's relation to nature becomes manifest, for nature is revealed as being essentially for man, and man is revealed as being essentially for himself and is thus the highest being that is. At the end of history, man's self-affirmation is complete, for he has finally become absolutely free.

Contained in Marx's naturalist premise are the seeds of the very thing that he criticized in Hegel. For just as Hegel could only under-

⁵³ Ibid., p. 327.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

stand nature as spirit externalized, so Marx can only understand nature as an object for man. Neither sees nature as an encompassing domain which includes man; instead, both assert that man essentially transcends nature. The parallels here between Hegel and Marx are striking. What is for Hegel the product of spirit is for Marx the product of labor. What in Hegel is a process of development, in which spirit externalizes itself in its other being as self-loss, in Marx is the process whereby labor externalizes itself in its other being, property, as self-loss. And finally, just as for Hegel the transcendence of alienation is achieved through thought's recognition of itself in its other being, so for Marx the transcendence of alienation is achieved through man's recognition that everything that is is either a product of his activity, or an object of his activity and need. In so far as Marx posits man as the being who essentially transcends nature, the defect or limitation of Marx's doctrine appears, ironically, to be the same limitation that Marx himself revealed in his analysis of Hegel: namely, that nature is understood merely as a phase in the development of something higher; consequently, as Marx said of Hegel, nature is finally conceived as a "nothing, a nothing proving itself to be nothing."⁵⁵

III

According to Marx, Feuerbach was the first philosopher after Hegel to discover the importance of nature. As a consequence of his discovery he became the first thinker to seriously undermine Hegel's great system. Marx credits Feuerbach for having gained three crucial insights concerning the Hegelian method: first, he showed that philosophy was essentially an expression of man's alienation; second, he recognized the primacy of man's social relations; and third, he understood the defect of Hegel's concept of the negation of the negation, and hence the error inherent in his dialectical method as such. But whatever its virtues, Feuerbach's naturalism is deficient because, like Hegel, he abstracts from the real meaning of both nature and society.

Although Feuerbach recognizes the primacy of man's social relations, he fails to appreciate that these relations are not ones of harmony but of conflict. Since Feuerbach begins with the assumption that man's social relations are fundamentally harmonious, social conflict always appears to him as an aberration or accident. Yet the truth of the matter is exactly the reverse: all man's social relations are necessarily based on underlying social conflicts which can be resolved only through violent revolution. Because Feuerbach overlooks the pervasiveness of social conflict, he inevitably romanticizes all man's

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

actual relations: "he knows no other 'human relationships' 'of man to man' than love and friendship, and these idealized."⁵⁶

But Feuerbach is abstract not only in his treatment of man's social relations; he is also abstract in his treatment of nature. This is because he fails to take into account the most important fact concerning nature, namely, that man transforms it through his labor. Feuerbach's discussion of nature is inadequate because he analyzes it independent of man and his productive activity. When Feuerbach deals with natural objects he forgets that the decisive fact about them is not that they are part of nature, or in part produced by nature, but that they are worked upon and thus transformed by man. What is primary, therefore, is not what nature is without man, but what it becomes when man works upon it. Marx argues against Feuerbach's static view of nature by pointing out that "even the objects of the simplest 'sensuous certainty' are given to him [Feuerbach] only through social development, industry, and commercial relationships."⁵⁷ The important thing about the world is not that man perceives it through his naturally given sense apparatus, but rather that man creates the world which he then perceives. The act of perception presupposes the act of producing. Production therefore is the necessary precondition for perception, and not the other way around. In a revealing passage in the *German Ideology*, Marx says that "The cherry tree, like almost all fruit trees, was transplanted into our zone by *commerce* only a few centuries ago, as we know, and only by this action of a particular society in a particular time has it become 'sensuous certainty' for Feuerbach."⁵⁸ Moreover, he points out sarcastically that Feuerbach's abstraction from the importance of production leads him to forget how completely he is himself dependent on production: "So much is this activity, the continuous sensuous working and creating, this production, the basis of the whole sensuous world as it now exists, that, were it interrupted for only a year, Feuerbach would find not only a tremendous change in the natural world but also would soon find missing the entire world of men and his own perceptual faculty, even his own existence."⁵⁹

According to Marx, Feuerbach is correct in his understanding that man is part of nature and that, going beyond other materialists, man is himself a "sensuous object."⁶⁰ Nevertheless, Feuerbach fundamentally misunderstands the significance of man's sensuous nature because he fails to see that man is both a sensuous object *and* a historically productive subject, and that in producing for himself man decisively changes himself, and at the same time changes nature as well. Marx's crucial premise here is that nature is a realm whose essence as man

⁵⁶ "The German Ideology," p. 419.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 417.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 418.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

transforms it according to his own needs. In this sense, nature is itself historical, for it remains subordinate to man's productive capacity. Since Feuerbach abstracts from this historical dimension, his model of nature is always the nature that existed prior to man's productive relation to it. But, as Marx points out, as man continues to produce and extend the network of his production, the natural world in its pre-human state is steadily shrinking.⁶¹ It remains, he says, only "on a few Australian coral islands of recent origin."⁶² Thus Feuerbach's doctrine of nature stands refuted by the reality of history. What he never understands is that nature and man's relation to nature necessarily change through man's activity. Accordingly, Marx concludes his critique by saying: "As far as Feuerbach is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he deals with history he is not a materialist. Materialism and history completely diverge with him. . . ."⁶³

IV

To sum up: Marx's critique of philosophy is based on his insight into the inherent limitations of philosophy. Yet, paradoxically, it is also based on his belief that philosophy reveals certain important truths and, finally, *the* truth concerning man. Marx's own philosophy incorporates these truths: the truth of idealism, that man is his own creator; the truth of materialism, that man is a natural being and therefore a part of nature. Thus Marx's thought is a synthesis and transcendence of all previous philosophy but one which, however, finally abolishes philosophy. For Marx also believes that philosophy's final insight is its recognition that its true realization is found in practice because practice can incorporate the full meaning of philosophical truth. The abolition of philosophy coincides, therefore, with the complete actualization of man. Thus the abolition of philosophy signals the abolition of the hitherto seemingly eternal divergence between man's essence and his existence, between his potential and the empirically actual, between theory and practice, between freedom and necessity,

⁶¹ In this passage, it is important to realize that Marx is explicitly asserting his ultimate belief that nature will be completely absorbed into the historical process. Most interpreters of Marx ignore the significance of this fact and thus get bogged down in a contradiction which is revealed in its simplicity in chapter 11 (p. 183) of Robert Tucker's book *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx*. In his discussion there of the relation of nature to history, Tucker rightly emphasizes that in Marx's view nature is included within the historical domain; yet he then goes on to say that the historical process is actually restricted to "man-made nature" and not to nature simply. Tucker makes a similar mistake on p. 196, where he interprets Engels' statement that man will become the "conscious Lord of Nature" to mean only that man will come to master his technology. In other words, according to Tucker, Engels' statement has nothing to do with man's control of external nature itself.

⁶² "The German Ideology," p. 418.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 419.

between the individual and society. In short, the abolition of philosophy becomes the precondition for the solution to all human problems, "and knows itself as this solution."⁶⁴

According to Marx, philosophy is characterized by one fundamental mistake: it posits thought as the only true reality. Philosophy ultimately seeks to explain all phenomena in terms of reason. This is its delusion. In Nietzschean terms, philosophy is a tyrannical expression of a blind will to power. In Marxian language, it is an alien and alienating activity because, by making reason the sole reality, philosophy overlooks the overwhelming importance of man's material condition. Yet it is this condition which establishes the real meaning and foundation of human life, for man is a needy being on the one hand, and a productive being on the other. Moreover, by claiming that only reason is real, philosophy remains uncritical or unphilosophical concerning its own activity. Thus it contradicts itself because it fails to reflect with sufficient seriousness upon its own foundations. Instead, it takes itself for granted and hence remains unaware of itself in two respects. First, it is unaware of its own arbitrary beginnings; second, it is unaware that in starting in an abstraction its conclusion must also be abstract; at this point, however, it is an abstraction not only from man's empirical reality but from his essential reality, the future communist society. To put it in terms of Marx's positive discoveries, philosophy is defective because it misunderstands the importance of productivity, history, and nature.

Having sought to explain the defect not of one particular philosophy but of all philosophy as such, Marx begins the radical assault on philosophy which ends in the call for its wholesale destruction. Marx's attack marks the first serious defeat for philosophy, for it necessarily begins to crumble only when philosophers themselves come to question it not in order to correct its past mistakes but to eliminate it altogether. Ironically, as in all such challenges, Marx's attack is based on the very standards that philosophy has itself developed and made important, the standards of reason and truth. Thus the destruction of philosophy is necessary, according to Marx, because its fundamental claim to seek the truth has been refuted. Philosophers are not disinterested, impartial seekers of the truth; rather they are products of their society, unavoidably entangled in forces and interests which they remain unaware of and over which they have no control. Yet there is an important difference between Marx and all later philosophical critics of philosophy: according to Marx, philosophy is abolished not only because of the discovery of its inherent limitations, but also because of its ultimate success, for having gained absolute knowledge, philosophy is complete and therefore comes to a final and fitting end.

Like all philosophers, Marx begins with certain assumptions, but he

⁶⁴ "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (1844)," p. 304.

claims that, unlike other philosophers, he is fully conscious of what his assumptions are. In the beginning of the *German Ideology*, he succinctly states the initial insight which is the basis of his entire philosophy.

He says there that "the first premise of all human existence, and hence of all history, (is) the premise . . . that men must be able to live in order to be able 'to make history'" and that since "life involves above all eating and drinking, shelter, clothing, and many other things . . . the first historical act thus is the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself."⁶⁵

What Marx is saying, in effect, is that the premise or assumption which he begins with is really not a premise or assumption at all; certainly it is not the kind of assumption with which other philosophers have begun, for it is transparent, commonsensical, and obvious to all: man must first be alive "in order to make history."⁶⁶ Yet Marx is very misleading here, for what he means by life, production, and history is something which is not obvious, namely, that through production man creates his own life, and that history is the necessary process of this self-creation. Marx believes that his speculative conclusions must inevitably follow from his simple commonsense premises. What he fails to see, however, is that his simple premises already contain, or are already the result of, a prior philosophical interpretation, for it is by no means clear that because man is materially productive, he creates himself, completely overcomes nature, and establishes a universal, classless, laborless society. Contained within Marx's seemingly commonsense premises, therefore, is the germ of his own idealism, which sees in history the absolute emancipation of man and sees in man the absolute overcoming of nature.

Marx's critique of philosophy is powerful and telling as he discovers and delineates philosophy's underlying assumptions. The overestimation of thought in the realm of human affairs is a perennial problem that the philosopher must always face. Yet an equal danger lies in an underestimation of reason, especially when it arises through a method of debunking which seeks to explain the rational by the non-rational. This is clearly the danger that Marx succumbs to. Yet he does this in a peculiarly complex and elusive way, for underneath his critique of reason lies a faith in reason as strong and pervasive as the faith he criticized in the other philosophers of whom he was so contemptuous. What else could account for the fact that Marx believed that history developed according to definite laws which would finally lead to the creation of a universal society where all men would be completely free? What does the union of theory and practice mean, if not that reason should rule the world? Marx wanted to liberate man through a critique of philosophy which would sweep away all ideological

⁶⁵ "The German Ideology," p. 419.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

obstacles to material development, for the rationality necessary for liberation was to be found not in thought or consciousness but in pure production. But in his haste to liberate man, he overlooked the genuine obstacles to liberation of which earlier philosophers were more fully aware. Marx's critique of philosophy remains incomplete because of this oversight, and because he failed to appreciate the extent to which he incorporated the tradition that he criticized and rejected.