

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Natural Virtue and Capital's False Endoxa

Lance Kirby

second year student in philosophy at American Public University Systems, 111 West Congress Street Charles Town, WV 25414.

Received: 24 November 2023 Accepted: 11 December 2023 Published: 11 January 2024

Corresponding Author: Lance Kirby, second year student in philosophy at American Public University Systems, 111 West Congress Street Charles Town, WV 25414

Abstract

The influence of ancient Greek thought upon the work of Karl Marx, and in particular his relationship to the virtue ethics of Aristotle, is demonstrated with a virtue ethical analysis through a Marxist lens of such concepts as natural virtue, endoxa, and pleonexia in a capitalist context. It is argued that Natural Virtue aids the legitimacy of Capital's inverted value system and undermines worker solidarity through the agency, as shown through one example of well-known comedians who entertain with political satire. It concludes with a suggestion of the ethical implications and a possible response to the conditions described, and additionally, it attempts briefly to address a commonly encouraged misconception by Marxist critics of the extreme moral position typically argued to characterize the political left.

Keywords: Karl Marx, Aristotle, Structural Endoxa, Alienation, Virtue Ethics.

1. Introduction

Although he did not write explicitly on ethics, it is difficult to deny the ethical implications of Karl Marx's work (Blackledge, *Marxism and Ethics.*), and, in particular, the classical influences upon his thought. As a deeply learned student of the classics, Marx shares not a little affinity with his Greek predecessors in their shared conclusions on economics, the state, and what the good life consists of and how such a life might be made a reality.

But of all the ancients, Aristotle stands head and shoulders above the rest, like a presiding spirit over Marx's entire project. It should therefore be no surprise if Aristotle's ethical thought seems more than once to creep out of the otherwise imposing monolith of Marxism, like the buds of spring flowers that sprout from between brick masonry. Just as did Aristotle, Marx considered the imperative of self-direction and the autonomy to choose as essential for morality and happiness. Both viewed a life controlled by external powers as unworthy of its name (Carpenter, "Historical

Materialism, Ideological Illusion, and the Aristotelian Heart of Marx's Condemnation of Capitalism.").

I will argue, not so much that Marxism is compatible with Virtue Ethics as previous studies have already made such a connection (Mansfield, "Marx on Aristotle.") but, instead will seek to demonstrate one example of how a Marxist virtue ethical analysis may be applied. Specifically, the effects of what Aristotle termed Natural Virtue and its legitimation of Capitalism's false Structural Endoxa, and the consequences which result.

2. Results and Discussion

It should be helpful if I begin by providing some background for a select group of terms that I feel are not sufficiently explained within the body of the argument proper.

Endoxa is usually interpreted as the respectable opinion held by experts and tested by experience. However, if Endoxa is merely the name for conventional morality it is of little use. As others have proposed there are

Citation: Lance Kirby. Natural Virtue and Capital's False Endoxa. *Journal of Philosophy and Ethics.* 2024;6(1):1-5

©The Author(s) 2024. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

grounds to view Endoxa as of two kinds. (Klein, "The Value of Endoxa in Ethical Argument."). The first is comparable to the concepts of Ideology (Marx, *The German Ideology*), Cultural Hegemony, and Marx's critique of Hegelian Sittlichkeit (Rosen, "The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology."), supports a false view of reality, which I label Structural Endoxa. The second, consisting of opinions (or premises) that are almost always accepted upon reasoned reflection, I label Regulative Endoxa.

Pleonoxia could stand as a synonym for the very worst excesses of Capitalism. (MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.) It is a rapacious and unquenchable desire for acquisition without end, a value that, placed on an altar as the highest good by Structural Endoxa, debases all human relations into contractual relations, of a measure of misery that has no mean but the extremes of the excess of the exploiter and the deficiency of the exploited. As Marx puts it: "*Accumulation of wealth at one pole is, therefore, at the same time accumulation of misery, the torment of labour, slavery, ignorance, brutalization and moral degradation at the opposite pole, i.e. on the side of the class that produces its own product as capital.*" (Marx, *Capital*.) From this relationship arises Alienation.

The worker who has no control over the product of their labor, who must sell their labor power to survive, and as a consequence is limited with the loss of autonomy to choose how they might prefer to live, becomes subject to Alienation. (Marx and Engels, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and the *Communist Manifesto*. 69-84).

Akrasia is a lack of self-mastery or, incontinence. It is important to note Aristotle's conception of Akrasia is far more complex than the form that I discuss (Ross and Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, VII. 1.), but all the various shades of meaning with which the term is imbued are unnecessary to outline in the argument presented here; a weakness of character is all that I mean to imply.

Intuitive Reason is concerned with the first indefinable threads of reasoning. It is reasoning in a broad sense where certain judgments come to us about the world but for which, at least at that moment, we can formulate no proof for their validity. (Ibid, VI. 6.). Intuition is the raw mucilage from which we form our perception of the world. To illustrate, it is common in science for a scientist to "guess" the cause of some phenomenon and then design an experiment to test their assumption. The assumption before it can be verified constitutes this Intuitive Reason.

Lastly, I should explain Moral (or Ethical) Virtue, and how it is distinct. Aristotle defined virtues as either moral or intellectual. (Ibid, I. 13.). This is because Aristotle does not see virtues as being part of us but, as something we must acquire and practice. Essentially intellectual virtues help us to determine truth, whereas moral virtues constitute character. But both are necessary to attain perfect virtue the ultimate, if difficult, goal of human flourishing.

As explained above, Structural Endoxa should be taken as synonymous with Ideology or Sittlichkeit, ethical life as it is structured by state and social institutions. Structural Endoxa is the opinion of the ruling class, not that form of widely respected views embodied in tradition and accepted by the wise as Aristotle is typically construed to have defined it. The values of true or, Regulative Endoxa, values, some of which I will highlight presently, are hidden in plain view and often paid lip service to by the elite, but rarely if ever honored in the breach.

Pleonoxia, the highest good of Capital's Structural Endoxa, encourages the development of Alienation. Alienation, in cutting off the laborer from their labor and stunting each individual's need for rational self-expression, at the same time limits personal autonomy, an autonomy possible only through the acquisition of Capital, preventing most individuals from making those choices in life that could lead to self-realization. Through Alienation human character, through Capital's artificially engendered scarcity of resources, makes each a competitor with each, and trust turns to mistrust as Plautus memorably phrased it: "*Man is a wolf and not a man toward a man when he doesn't know what he's like.*" (Plautus, *AMPHITRYON. THE COMEDY OF ASSES*).

Structural Endoxa, in creating this ethical dissonance, will often reveal itself to those receptive to its contradictions through a combination of Akrastic shame and Intuitive Reason. Intuitive Reason comes to us whenever we understand if only for a moment, the hypocritical and contradictory nature of Structural Endoxa. Such hypocrisy is evident when Structural Endoxa insists that we should not expect the state to help us yet notice, for example, those generous subsidies and favorable loans that were granted to many banks and corporations after the financial collapse of 2008. On a more popular level, it is the seeming prostitution of actors and entertainers whose careers at their final ebb, resort to the most humiliating projects to restore their visibility and perceived relevance. Programs

like Big Brother or Celebrity Apprentice are notable for this form of self-exploitation, but in practice, it may be applied to a wide range of otherwise well-respected entertainment.

With sudden insight, we grasp the absurdity of a system that renders even the basest of acts perfectly acceptable so long as the monetary reward is deemed high enough.¹ Additionally, compelled to lose oneself to Akrasia by the multiplicity of material desires spread before us, we sometimes feel a sense of shame and an intuitive insight into the contradiction between what we are taught to value through Regulative Endoxa, self-control, and what the Structural Endoxa of Capital continually entices us to, incontinence.

The Pleonexia of Capital is an engine for the manufacture of incontinence. In this the capitalist may agree, and contend that that is the nature of business, to find what people want and then to give it to them. But this is not all, for it also manufactures desire where there had been no desire before. Again, our capitalist might agree only to reply that it is up to the individual to develop self-mastery and that this is not the concern of Capital to police the incontinence of the consumer.

Yet, such policing is thought acceptable, both on the large scale when corporate lobbyists endorse legislation that protects an individual industry from competition or, under the guise of prudishness, endorse statutes that penalize small businesses selling the same goods and services to their communities that large corporations provide, but at much greater cost.²

It is here that I seek to consider one important mechanism for the continued legitimization of Structural Endoxa; one that, if not so effective the many who labor in wage slavery might otherwise, through the insight I have described, organically remove their chains with time.

Following Aristotle, I agree that our moral virtue is guided by the quality of Phronesis. Put another way, Phronesis might be understood as practical wisdom. It is a quality that does not appear fully formed at birth, but is the end result of the experiences of life and our considered reflection upon them. The necessity for

¹ "...no one would say that it is the part of a practically wise man to do willingly the basest acts." (Aristotle 2009, VII. 1.)

² By prudish I refer to those laws directed against those who work in prostitution, or who sell recreational drugs. Both of which much larger corporate entities advertise to the public, either as part of marketing ploys, or pharmaceuticals at an extraordinary markup.

experience and sober thought for the development of Phronesis is why it is almost always the sole province of adult maturity for, as I have already stated, virtue is something learned and sustained through habit. However, this is not to say that the very young lack any conception of the good, or a desire to do good, only that such action arises from a good impulse or motivation, but is undirected by reason. Such unguided motivation is termed Natural Virtue. (Ross and Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics* VI. 13.). It is for this reason that Structural Endoxa's masking of the true good, of the virtues that provide a better quality of life, prevents the development of Phronesis as it would be in a natural state of mind.

An example of what I mean is as follows: A young child wakes early to cook breakfast for his parents as a surprise, only to burn down the house while attempting to operate the stove. The judgment of experience was unfortunately lacking and, we see clearly the meaning behind that old proverb: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." In a very similar fashion Natural Virtue's ignorance of Phronesis is on display when members of the wealthy elite attempt to be charitable to the less fortunate. Although persons associated with business such as, for example, Andrew Carnegie in the past or, Bill Gates in our own time, come first to mind when considering such activity, a far more powerful source for this form of honest, if misguided, motivation is more often the domain of the entertainer.

The aptly named entertainment industry is comprised of an elite, but not an elite entirely without heart. Many of its most successful performers attain wealth and influence perhaps too quickly to reflect thoughtfully upon the system that has rewarded them and why, or have lived so long within the elite as to forget their more humble origins if they were not in fact, as Hamlet has it: "...to the manner born..."; consequently, this may sometimes lead to an understandable defensiveness of said system.

This is often most unsettling when delivered with the aid of comedy. As genuine public intellectuals have grown increasingly scarce, a new breed of political comedians has arisen to take their place. The influence of such comedians on public opinion gives one pause when it is considered just how tame and misleading their ostensible satire is often revealed to be. ("John Oliver Should Be More Like Mad Max"). Failing to understand, or to accept, that the majority of the problems they seek to ameliorate reside in

the larger context of Capital's system of alienation and delimiting individual choice merely helps to put a smiling human face upon a very inhuman and unfeeling machine. Though they are elites who have enormous influence and resources, they make us laugh, and laughter endears. When the larger context is forgotten or ignored (if even present to start), we forget that such individuals have a strong interest, if only unconscious, in maintaining the status quo.

Entertainment is a profession, not a charity; there is nothing noble in telling jokes and, in return, receiving an income that some may consider grossly disproportionate to one's perceived labor. The goal of financial success in our society is to enjoy the pleasures and benefits that wealth can grant us and our offspring. However, the bad habits instilled by Structural Endoxa are difficult to grasp for what they are, and there is often still the spur of Natural Virtue to motivate many such individuals towards what they mistakenly perceive to be the good, though their understanding of the good is directed by naivety rather than by reason, their Phronesis having been shaped by Structural Endoxa's misleading consensus. Thus, in a cruel irony, it is not a lack of empathy but an often all too abundant motivation to do good that helps the continued legitimization of Capital's Structural Endoxa, creating a passive acceptance through the seductive syllogism: "The system appears to have worked well enough for them, and they accept it, and I like them, therefore it should be good enough for me".

Now I would like to explore some implications of the above, first by asking: What does this imply for Structural Endoxas enablers? From a virtue ethical perspective, one possible interpretation is that those elites who lack Phronesis yet continue to support Structural Endoxa unwittingly are more culpable than their impoverished counterparts. Virtue requires that one is free to choose the mean in any situation, "*Virtue...is a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean...the mean relative to us, this being determined by reason...*" (Ross and Brown, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, II. 6.) the mean, being the middle path between excess and deficiency. For example, the mean between recklessness and cowardice is courage.

But the mean is not without qualification. As Aristotle points out, virtue must be judged on a case-by-case basis and individual circumstances should always be taken into account. (Ibid.). Those with diminished

resources, and thus decreased autonomy to choose, are to be judged less harshly than those whose resources are plentiful and therefore possess greater autonomy. Ignorance is thus no excuse for the support of Structural Endoxa.

Additionally, there is one further implication left to examine regarding the mean. If it is true that Pleonexia has been adopted as the chief good of Structural Endoxa, we must consider how such a value system might be countered. The effects of Pleonexia and our ethical response towards them have already been dealt with in part elsewhere (MacIntyre, *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity*.) however, the consideration of Pleonexia in light of the mean, I believe, has not. As I have already discussed, the mean is the middle point between excess and deficiency. Pleonexia, as an extreme form of acquisitiveness, is clearly a form of morbid excess. In contradistinction, it might at first appear that its remedy should be selflessness, but this would be just to replace an excess with its deficient form. Indeed, this solution has usually been painted by critics of Marxism as its own form of extremism,³ albeit of a leftist variety.

Although it is outside the scope of this essay to expand upon in-depth, briefly I might suggest the following: The mean between Pleonexia and selflessness is a form of Philautos, a term used by Aristotle to denote self-love. At first, this designation may appear absurd, as self-love is but a not-too-dissimilar state from Pleonexia. However, Aristotle makes a distinction between Philautos driven by passion, and Philautos directed by reason. (Salmieri, "Aristotle on Selfishness?"). The reasonable person will regard a good that benefits the whole community as the greater good, as it will ultimately benefit themselves as well if only in the long term; a much wiser investment than the perceived good of the moment that, in a moment, is expended. It is therefore not a monkish asceticism that we must embrace, and that is exaggerated by Marxism's critics, but a rational Philautos that would seek to counteract the anti-communal hyper-individualism of Structural Endoxa.

3. Conclusion

As the Structural Endoxa of Capitalism seeks to isolate and extol the virtues of the individual, the working class is instilled through Alienation with a distrust of the group and political engagement, thus negating the working class's greatest weapon: Solidarity.

³ A charge that Marx refuted early on: (Marx 1976, 264-265.)

4. References

1. Blackledge, Paul. *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire, and Revolution*. SUNY Press, 2013.
2. Carpenter, Andrew N. "Historical Materialism, Ideological Illusion, and the Aristotelian Heart of Marx's Condemnation of Capitalism." *Studia Philosophica Wratislaviensia* 8 (2013).
3. *Constructing Marxist Ethics: Critique, Normativity, Praxis*. BRILL, 2015.
4. "Economic Manuscripts: Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy." Accessed January 3, 2023. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/preface.htm>.
5. "John Oliver Should Be More Like Mad Max." Accessed January 3, 2023. <https://jacobin.com/2015/05/john-oliver-last-week-mad-max-business>.
6. Klein, Sherwin. "The Value of Endoxa in Ethical Argument." *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 9, no. 2 (1992): 141–57. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27744011>.
7. MacIntyre, Alasdair. *Ethics in the Conflicts of Modernity: An Essay on Desire, Practical Reasoning, and Narrative*. Cambridge University Press, 2016.
8. Mansfield, Harvey C. "Marx on Aristotle: Freedom, Money, and Politics." *The Review of Metaphysics* 34, no. 2 (1980): 351–67. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20127503>.
9. Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*. Penguin UK, 2004.
10. ———. *The German Ideology: Including Theses on Feuerbach and Introduction to The Critique of Political Economy*. Prometheus Books, 1976.
11. Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*. Prometheus Books, 2009.
12. McCarthy, George E. *Marx and Aristotle: Nineteenth-Century German Social Theory and Classical Antiquity*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1992.
13. ———. *Marx and the Ancients: Classical Ethics, Social Justice, and Nineteenth-Century Political Economy*. Rowman & Littlefield, 1990.
14. Plautus. *AMPHITRYON. THE COMEDY OF ASSES*. Harvard University Press, 2011.
15. Rosen, Michael. "The Marxist Critique of Morality and the Theory of Ideology." In *Morality, Reflection, and Ideology*, edited by Edward Harcourt. Oxford University Press, 2000.
16. Ross, Aristotle Translated by David, and Edited by Lesley Brown, eds. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. New Edition, New to this Edition:, New Edition, New to this Edition: Oxford World's Classics. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
17. Salmieri, Gregory. "Aristotle on Selfishness? Understanding the Iconoclasm of Nicomachean Ethics Ix 8." *Ancient Philosophy*, April 1, 2014. <https://doi.org/10.5840/ancientphil20143417>.
18. "The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto (Great Books in Philosophy): Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, Martin Milligan: 9780879754464: Amazon.Com: Books." Accessed January 3, 2023. <https://www.amazon.com/Philosophic-Manuscripts-Communist-Manifesto-Philosophy/dp/087975446X>.