

Karl Marx's moral philosophy and critical views of Western morality

**Author:**Chris Jones¹ **Affiliation:**

¹Department of Systematic Theology and Ecclesiology, Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

Corresponding author:

Chris Jones,
chrisjones@sun.ac.za

Dates:

Received: 18 Apr. 2023

Accepted: 30 Aug. 2023

Published: 22 Nov. 2023

How to cite this article:

Jones, C., 2023, 'Karl Marx's moral philosophy and critical views of Western morality', *Verbum et Ecclesia* 44(1), a2877. <https://doi.org/10.4102/ve.v44i1.2877>

Copyright:

© 2023. The Author.
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article reflects on Karl Marx's moral thought, and his critical views of (human) rights, Christianity, Kant, and utilitarianism, and what he considers an alternative. The question of whether we should still take his moral approach seriously in today's context is also briefly addressed towards the end. This is done partly through the lens of American philosopher Vanessa Wills from The George Washington University, United States of America (US). More specifically, Marx's view of materialism, human nature, morality, and labour are discussed, after which human nature and certain needs are addressed. This is followed by his view of alienation under capitalism, his arguments for communism, and morality as an objective, universal, and historical phenomenon.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article implies that we cannot afford to lose our grip (and consensus) on what morality is. By critical discussion and comparison of empirical scientific findings on the emergence and nature of morality across, among others, religious and philosophical traditions, we stand a chance to better understand morality and to cooperate more effectively in tackling and solving global challenges.

Keywords: alienation; capitalism; Christianity; communism; human nature; Kant; Karl Marx; labour; materialism; morality; rights; utilitarianism; Vanessa Wills.

Introduction

Numerous authors during the last decades have analysed and written on Karl Marx's moral thought. However, I have decided to discuss his distinct and systematic conception of morality partly through the lens and work of the American philosopher Vanessa Wills from the George Washington University, United States of America (US). The reasons for this are that Marx's writings are so extensive that it is very challenging to work through his intellectual corpus thoroughly; and Wills in her doctoral dissertation (2011) makes a detailed analysis of Marx's moral thinking as it emerges throughout his intellectual career. This dissertation of Wills is an effort to contribute to the understanding of the moral philosophy of Marx, his critique of certain forms of Western morality, and why his moral approach could still be appealing to us today – the themes I was asked to reflect on (at the Conceptualisation of Morality in Philosophy – International Seminar, 01–02 November 2022, University of Pretoria). She furthermore does not hesitate to criticise critics who do not, according to her, deal rationally and fairly with Marx's moral views. I very briefly refer to some of them.

Wills (2011) claims:

[T]hat the theory Marx developed in his work does have a distinct moral content ... that Marx's conception of morality is based in his conception of essential human nature and of human beings as social and natural beings who produce their own existence through labour ..." (p. 1)

and that 'Marx's approach to morality is both plausible and defensible'. Although the latter is debatable, it is not addressed in this article because it was not part of the organisers' request to participate in this seminar.

A further valuable aspect of her study is that it divides the writings of Marx into three periods, namely 1840 to 1847, 1847 to 1857, and 1858 to 1883, and then points out how Marx's moral thought runs and develops right through all his writings, indicating that his theory of social change is not amoral and incoherent, and that Marx did not abandon it later in his life, as claimed by some scholars. By treating his writings as a unity, or developing whole,¹ Wills (2011) traces:

1. Certain interpreters such as Louis Althusser and Nicholas Churchich argue that Marx's writings undergo 'breaks' or 'ruptures'. Churchich argues in his 1994 book, *Marxism and Morality: A Critical Examination of Marxist Ethics*, that '[t]here can hardly be any doubt that there is, in fact, a definite break in the development of Marx's ideas' (p. 31). This is seriously doubted by Wills (2011:2). For her 'there is a large amount of continuity between Marx's early works, such as *The Holy Family* or the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, and his later ones such as *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*'.

Read online:

Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.

[T]he development of themes such as individuality, alienation, rights, and freedom throughout these works. (p. 2)

She also disagrees:

[W]ith interpreters such as Daniel Brudney² who argue that Marx tried, but failed,³ to abandon philosophy around the time of writing *The German Ideology*. (Written by Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1846 and for the first time published in 1932)

What we discover in Marx's works is a 'sustained and conscious interest in philosophical questions' (2011:3), and that his answers to these questions grew precisely because his involvement with economic issues, deepened (Wills 2011):

[O]ne of the most striking examples of this sustained philosophical engagement is Marx's discussion of alienation in his early works such as the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and then later in the *Grundrisse* and *Capital*. Similarly, a comparison of Marx's critique of Utilitarianism in *The German Ideology* and in *Capital* provides one [a] very useful and interesting point of reference to understand how his ability to diagnose the faults of various moral theories sharpens and becomes more concrete as Marx develops his understanding of capitalism as an economic system. In the later treatment, Marx is able to criticize Utilitarianism not just on the grounds that it is hypocritical or that it proceeds from false views about human nature; he argues that even the more sophisticated Utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill is fatally flawed because it is Utopian and unrealistic about the possibility for goods to be distributed in a different way on the economic basis of capitalist production. (p. 3)

I agree with Wills (2011:4), especially when she reasons that Marx's moral philosophy and the relation between morality and human nature, and morality and materialism, become clear and convincing when we consider *all* Marx's writings together. In this respect, I also tend to agree with Marx when he reasons that consciousness and morality are the result of matter or materialism (cf. section 2 'Marx's view of materialism'), because our consciousness and ethical behaviour are biologically constituted (Van den Heever & Jones 2019:1–26).

One thing that becomes clear in his writings is that Marx does not discard his conviction that 'man is the highest being for man' and that 'rich and all-sided individuals' must be produced. For this to realise, human beings must prosper and constitute the highest ruling principle, while resources and productive capacities in a society must be democratically and rationally controlled by the largest number of that society, directed at satisfying human needs, and developing human powers. In other words, it can only be realised in a communist society, as justified by Marx (Marx & Engels 1989:87). His focus, however, on (concrete) individuality is somewhat surprising in the light of the fact that he is usually associated with seeking collective responses for social ills. The full development of individuals that is advanced by Marx, is real; however, he has it against (abstract) egoism⁴

2. Ruth Abbey responded critically to 'Brudney's way of reading Marx'. See her article: 'Young Karl Does Headstands: A Reply to Daniel Brudney', 2002.

3. Wills also disagrees with Lawrence and Jost 'who argue ... that Marx tried and succeeded': see their article 'Why Marx Left Philosophy for Social Science', 2007.

4. See Stirner – *The Ego and Its Own* (1995) critiqued by Marx.

that he frequently attacks (Marx 1902; Marx & Engels 1975b:120–121) and abstracts individualism which is also rejected by him.

Marx's view of materialism

Marx claims that '[I]t is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness' (Marx 1993). This is emphasised throughout his work, especially in *The German Ideology* and in the Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx & Engels 1975b:53, 138; Marx 1993). Marx believes that matter ontologically takes precedence over ideas, and this shapes his view of the evolution of morality throughout human history. As Hegel (2020) did before him, Marx recognises a dialectical interconnection between the material and the ideal, and between the abstract and the concrete, always starting with the concrete, determinate being in order to accomplish the most penetrating analysis of reality.

Marx and Engels (1976a), in *The German Ideology* write:

In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of the life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. In the first method of approach the starting-point is consciousness taken as the living individual; in the second method, which conforms to real life, it is the real living individuals themselves, and consciousness is considered solely as their consciousness. (p. 36)

Historical materialism as method, is described by Marx as:

[M]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past. (Marx & Engels 1979:103⁵)

Marx believes that human beings, engaging with their environment through work, change their own existence and, in doing so, also transform their consciousness.⁶ There is, as referred to here, a dialectical interaction and unity between ideas and matter, in which matter plays a crucial but not the only part in determining how this unity develops.⁷

5. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

6. See Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right' in Marx and Engels (1975a:182).

7. See Cohen (1988:185) who agrees although he has put forward an alternative dialectic.

Human nature, morality and labour

Marx believed that morality is primarily derived from an evaluation of what human beings are and what, given their nature, is advantageous for them to prosper. However, for Marx morality is not determined merely by 'humans' biological being and biological needs'; although his 'moral theory takes human nature as its starting point', he does not 'mean to reduce human nature to merely biological facts ...' (Wills 2011:9–10). It also has a social⁸ side. Marx writes in this respect in *The German Ideology*:

The production of life, both of one's own in labour and of fresh life in procreation, now appears as a double relationship: on the one hand as a natural, on the other as a social relationship. By social we understand the co-operation of several individuals, no matter under what conditions, in what matter and to what end. It follows from this that a certain mode of production, or industrial stage, is always combined with a certain mode of co-operation, or social stage, and this mode of co-operation is itself a 'productive force'. Further, that the multitude of productive forces accessible to men determines the nature of society, hence, that the 'history of humanity' must always be studied and treated in relation to the history of industry and exchange. (Marx & Engels 1976a:43)

For Marx the core of human existence is the labour process. This involves not only the nature of human beings and the nature of the engaged world in which labour is performed consciously and purposefully, but also a human being's own relationship to nature as well as our relationships to other people. Marx describes the labour process as follows:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material reactions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. (*Capital* Marx & Engels 1996:188)

The labour process distinguishes human beings from other animals in the sense that we 'pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human' (*Capital* Marx & Engels 1996:188). He then strikingly explains that:

[A] spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realizes a purpose of his own. (*Capital* Marx & Engels 1996:188)

For Marx, knowing a thing's moral status requires knowing if it will enable people to understand that they are social and natural beings who satisfy their needs and change

8. Marx writes in *Theses on Feuerbach*: '[T]he essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx and Engels 1976b:7).

their existence via labour. There exist different classes in society that interact with each other. When analysing the capitalist economic system, one discovers that people fall into two main categories namely, those who buy labour-power, and those who sell it. Wills (2011) states that in such a system:

[Y]our actions are not so 'free', but rather determined in significant ways by the economic laws which govern the movement of commodities in such a society. And these actors are not so 'equal', because those who live by buying labor-power and amassing profit tend to have the upper hand over those who live by selling their labor-power daily, thereby contributing to the store of dead labor in the hands of the capitalist. (p. 17)

To know what is morally required, one needs to know as much as possible of a certain context – such as class and the mode of production. In this respect Marx reasons that '[w]hen reality is depicted, philosophy as an independent branch of knowledge loses its medium of existence' (Marx & Engels 1976a:37). Only by investigating and knowing the historical context, one becomes able to make accurate moral claims.

Although Marx believes that human beings should work to promote communism in the current historical moment, this does not mean that propagating communism is always the ethically proper activity for human beings to engage in. Therefore, morality depends on a vast variety of determining factors at a certain point in time. Marx investigates how the alienation of humans from their core nature, results in an immoral, restricted existence for them and even poses a threat to their ongoing existence.

This is key for Marx. He⁹ wrote early in his career that there is an important imperative for human beings, namely '[t]o overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being' (Marx & Engels 1975a:182). In *The German Ideology*, he writes that capitalism produces the worker 'in the role of commodity' and in keeping the worker in this role makes him a 'mentally and physically dehumanized being' (Marx & Engels 1976a:121). In Marx's 1844 manuscript 'Antithesis of Capital and Labour', he makes the point that capitalism brings about 'immorality, deformity, and dulling of the workers and the capitalists' (Marx & Engels 1975a:284). In this sense Marx's method for determining what, at a given historical moment is moral or not, becomes scientific.

Human nature and needs

Where human needs are satisfied, they become important for Marx's moral conception. And these needs develop and expand as human powers and as an increased sophistication of their social production. These needs are not only historic and created by production but they are also social in nature, 'the offspring of social production and intercourse,' which

9. See his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1975).

again have their basis in natural needs that must be satisfied continually (Marx in *Grundrisse* 1993). In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes:

The first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all history [is that humans] must be in a position to live in order to be able to 'make history'. But life involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled in order to sustain human life. (Marx & Engels 1976a:42)

Having said this, it is not a case that one can simply reduce social needs to natural needs, and then regard natural needs as the real deeds – and that social needs arise as somehow less authentic. Basic, biological needs often give rise to increasingly social needs, for example, when workers, struggling with their bosses for higher wages, to ensure an ongoing access to food and housing, bring about a need to experience solidarity with their co-workers.

Marx and Engels (1975a), in 'Human Requirements and the Division of Labour' writes:

When communist *artisans* associate with one another, theory, propaganda, etc., is their first end. But at the same time, as a result of this association, they acquire a new need – the need for society – and what appears as a means becomes an end. In this practical process the most splendid results are to be observed whenever French socialist workers are seen together. Such things as smoking, drinking, eating, etc., are no longer means of contact or means that bring together. Association, society and conversation, which again has association as its end, are enough for them; the brotherhood of man is no mere phrase with them, but a fact of life, and the nobility of man shines upon us from their work-hardened bodies. (p. 306)

Alienation¹⁰ under capitalism and moral arguments for communism

For Marx, the significance of communism will realise 'a new manifestation of the forces of human nature and a new enrichment of human nature' (Marx & Engels 1975a:306), while under capitalism human beings are separated from the natural world. Under capitalism, as Marx writes, '[I]t is not only that man has no human needs – even his animal needs cease to exist' (Marx & Engels 1975a:308). Thus, the development of human beings is limited, and the fulfilment of human needs inhibited. Marx wrote in 1844 that under capitalism 'the worker's existence is ... brought under the same condition as the existence of every other commodity' (Marx & Engels 1975a:65). Istvan Mészáros (1975), Hungarian Marxist philosopher, writes that under capitalism:

[A]lienation is ... characterised by the universal extension of 'saleability' (i.e. the transformation of everything into

10. This is a very important concept for Marx – throughout his career, and intimately connected with his view of 'rich individuality' as well as closely connected to his critique of bourgeois rights (for the latter see: *Capital*, Marx & Engels 1996:583).

commodity); by the conversion of human beings into 'things' so that they could appear as commodities on the market (in other words: the 'reification' of human relations); and by the fragmentation of the social body into 'isolated individuals' ... who pursued their own limited, particularistic aims 'in servitude to egoistic need', making a virtue out of their selfishness in their cult of privacy. (p. 35)

One requires money to satisfy one's needs, and for this, one must sell something:

Selling ... is the practical aspect of alienation ... Just as man, as long as he is in the grip of religion, is able to objectify his essential nature only by turning it into something alien, something fantastic, so under the domination of egoistic need he can be active practically, and produce objects in practice, only by putting his products, and his activity, under the domination of an alien being, and bestowing the significance of an alien entity – money – on them. (Marx & Engels 1975a:174)

Selling labour-power to satisfy 'egoistic' needs is alienating according to Marx in that:

[E]stranged labour reverses this relationship [between conscious being and species being] so that it is just because man is a conscious being that he makes his life activity, his *essential being*, a mere means to his *existence*. (Marx & Engels 1975a:276 [author's own emphasis])

In the manuscript 'Estranged Labour' Marx reasons that the:

[A]lienation¹¹ of the worker in his product means not only that his labor becomes an object, an external existence, but that it exists outside him, independently, as something alien to him, and that it becomes a power on its own confronting him. (Marx & Engels 1975a:272)

He continues to say that the:

[W]orker becomes an ever cheaper commodity the more commodities he creates. The *devaluation* of the world of men is in direct proportion to the *increasing value* of the world of things. (Marx & Engels 1975a:272)

For Marx 'the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation' (Marx & Engels 1975a:280).

In Marx's view both capitalist and worker are alienated in the capitalist society, but they experience it differently:

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. But the former class feels at ease and strengthened in this self-estrangement, it recognises estrangement as its own power and has in it the semblance of a human existence. The latter feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is, to use an expression of Hegel, in its abasement the indignation at that abasement, an indignation to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature. (Marx & Engels 1975b:36)

'Estranged Labour' was originally written in 1844. In 1847, in 'Wage Labour and Capital' he continued to reflect on this

11. Marx describes labour under capitalism as active alienation in several aspects. See among others Marx and Engels (1976a:274).

issue and writes that a worker 'sells [his labour-power] to another person' and that 'it is a commodity that he has auctioned off to another' (Marx & Engels 1977:202). In 1844, he referred to a worker's labour-power as 'self-sacrifice', and in 1847 he called it 'a sacrifice of his life'. In 1844, he wrote that 'the worker's activity is not his spontaneous activity' and 'belongs to another', and in 1847, the worker 'does not count the labour itself as a part of his life'.

Later, in *Grundrisse* (written in 1857–1858), Marx continued this line of thought:

In the bourgeois economy – and in the epoch of production to which it corresponds – the complete unfolding of man's inner potentiality turns into his total emptying-out. His universal objectification becomes his total alienation¹², and the demolition of all determined one-sided aims becomes the sacrifice of the [human] end-in-itself to a wholly external process. (Marx 1993)

This to show, among other things, that Marx did not abandon his moral views later in his life, as some critics claim. For Marx production must be placed under the rational, conscious control of people. For this to happen, social production must be coordinated socially and directed towards the creation of a society in which the free development of each is the precondition of the free development of all. Marx wants to see circumstances in 'which we might see ... the "all-sided development" of "rich individuality"¹³' (Wills 2011:26). In the *Grundrisse*, Marx desires:

[T]he development of the rich individuality which is as all-sided in its production as in its consumption, and whose labour also therefore appears no longer as labour, but as the full development of activity itself, in which natural necessity in its direct form has disappeared; because a historically created need has taken the place of the natural one. (Marx & Engels 1986a:251)

For Marx 'rich individuality' that can only be developed in communism, is:

[I]nstead of appearing as a debased, limited creature, hampered and controlled by economic laws, the human both is, essentially, a social being with a capacity for unlimited development through the labor process, and actually appears to be so in a society in which the natural world and the social sphere have been brought under man's conscious and rational control, and directed on the basis of human needs. (Wills 2011:28)

Marx (Marx & Engels 1986b:18), to point it out clearly, reasons that human beings are not only social but also individuated beings:¹⁴ 'man is not only a social animal, but an animal that can isolate itself only within society'. Individuation for Marx only takes place within society and only at a certain stage of

12.Wood (1981:44) writes that Marx's view on alienation undergoes a shift between his earlier and later work – from an 'explanatory concept' to a 'descriptive concept', but this is countered by Eugene Kamenka (1962:144–145) as well as Wills (2011:212–214) who agrees with Kamenka. As proof for these counter arguments by Kamenka and Wills, see Marx, *Capital* (Marx and Engels 1996:570), which is close to his thoughts on alienation as they appear in *Estranged Labor* (1844) and *Grundrisse* (Marx 1993).

13.See Lebowitz (2010); Marx and Engels (1986a:251).

14.See Marx and Engels (1986a:420), *Grundrisse*.

social and economic development. He also says in *Grundrisse*: 'The further back we go in history, the more does the individual, and accordingly also the producing individual, appear to be dependent and belonging to a larger whole' (Marx & Engels 1986b:18). He further states that 'society does not consist of individuals but expresses the sum of the relationships and conditions in which these individuals stand to one another' (*Grundrisse*, Marx & Engels 1986b:195). Marx sometimes uses the words 'social individuals'. This describes his notion of human being's nature that is inherently social and potentially 'richly individual', well.

Morality: Objective, universal, and historical

For Marx the content of morality is historical, but it is simultaneously also a product of human activity and emerged because of human social development. It will be eliminated once the gap between society as it is and society as it ought to be, has been closed and when the appearance and essence of humans have been brought into accordance.

Wills (2011) writes, for Marx:

[E]thics are derived in the first place from an understanding of what human beings are, but there is no reason to think that what human beings are is simply static or eternal. If that were the case, it would actually be very difficult to make sense of the charge of ahistoricism that Marx levels against other moral theories. In fact it is precisely because human social beings is constantly changing and developing, that the fact of the matter about what is good or bad for human beings at various historical stages changes and develops well. For Marx, morality is essentially historical. (pp. 29–30)

Marx explains the historicity of morality¹⁵ as the fact that the validity of particular moral principles and theories do not depend on some everlasting truths, but rather on the social development of humanity and the things that advance our social well-being at a specific point in human history. However, according to Marx, morality is not only historically rooted in the sense that it is a social product that emerged at a specific time in human history, but it will also eventually fade away—as indicated here—once the gap between human existence as it is and human existence as it ought to be is closed.

Something is morally good, according to Marx, if it promotes human advancement and increases conscious control in humans over their own being, and it is morally bad if it prevents these things from happening. Marx, for instance, believed that the moral condemnation of capitalism voiced from the perspective of the proletariat has universal and objective validity for all people because what they endure is 'no particular wrong but wrong generally'¹⁶ (Marx & Engels 1975a:186).

15.See West's (1991) critique of Marx's morality in: *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*.

16.Mills (1994) supports this understanding of Marx's morality in: 'Marxism, "Ideology," and Moral Objectivism', while Brenkert (1975) argues that 'Marx did not theorize a universal morality'.

Marx's critique of rights, Christianity, Kant, and utilitarianism

Rights^{17,18,19}

Marx does not vindicate communism by resorting to rights for its support as Wood (1981), for instance, claims. Marx offers a criticism of rights in the modern state that indicates how inadequate bourgeois rights theory is for addressing human needs. Marx's rejection of bourgeois rights is actually motivated by his perspective that the highest goal for humanity is the satisfaction of human needs and the development and fulfilment of each individual person. This argument leads to the conclusion that these bourgeois rights are an artefact of class society and the conditions of scarcity, competition, and dominance that characterise human relations in a capitalist society.

Rights are a political expression of economic relations, according to Marx. His analysis of rights has to do with his analysis of the relationship between privilege and rights. There is, in a class society on which the state is based, a tendency to transform existing privileges held by the ruling class into morally significant rights. Marx and Engels (1975a) say about private property:

[B]ased not on the association of man with man but rather on the separation of man from man. It is the right of this separation, the right of the restricted individual, withdrawn into himself. The practical application of man's right to liberty is man's right to private property. (pp. 162–163)

According to Marx and Wills (2011), the contemporary state guarantees these two rights (private property and the right to liberty). They argue:

[T]hat the proletariat has no 'particular right', he does not mean that it has no rights at all, but rather that the rights of proletarians and of people in a transitional socialist society are quite distinct in content from the rights of man recognised in bourgeois society. (p. 31, p. 81)

– meaning that they:

[A]re rights which correspond not to the isolated citizen, guarding his private sphere in a world of competition, but rights that correspond to a person who has no claim to private property and who survives and develops through cooperation with fellow persons upon whom he shares a mutual dependence. (Wills 2011:81)

Marx reasons that as sophisticated economic and social arrangements increase, they can give rise to sophisticated forms of rights to such extent that a society could be produced,

17. His critique of bourgeois rights and bourgeois concepts of freedom and equality runs right through his work up to *Grundrisse*, *Capital*, and *Critique of the Gotha Programme*.

18. See *Capital* (Marx and Engels 1996:730–731), on Marx's description of how rights, during the French Revolution, which could help workers, were practically subordinated to the bourgeoisie right of property.

19. For the link between Marx's critique of bourgeois rights and alienation, see: *Capital*, Marx and Engels (1996:583). For Marx's view on what standard can replace bourgeois rights, see his criticisms of right in *On the Jewish Question* and *A Contribution to a Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*.

which supersedes rights. Marx's understanding of rights²⁰ and justice comes down to the notion that 'the producers can be free only when they are in possession of the means of production' (*Preamble to the Programme of the French Workers' Party*, Marx & Engels 1989:340). For Marx, a 'right can never be higher than the economic structure of society and its cultural development which this determines'²¹ (*Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx & Engels 1989:87).

Christianity

Marx's critique of Christianity (and religion) is that it, like other moral theories, depend on a wrong understanding of human nature and that they, in different ways, legitimise and support capitalism. It is an expression of alienation, as already referred to, that humans experience in a class society or under capitalism. Marx writes that 'this state, this society, produce religion, an *inverted world-consciousness*, because they are an *inverted world*' (Marx & Engels 1975a:175). However, his critique of Christianity in particular and religion in general, is not entirely negative. He states that:

[T]he miserableness of religion is at once the expression of real misery and the protest against real misery. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of spiritless conditions. It is the opium of the people. (Marx & Engels 1975a:175)

For him the 'struggle against religion is ... indirectly a fight against the world of which religion is the spiritual aroma' (Marx & Engels 1975a:175). His very clear critique of Christian morality is illustrated in the following paragraph in *The Communism of the Rheinischer Beobachter*:

The social principles of Christianity have now had eighteen hundred years to be developed, and need no further development by Prussian Consistorial Counsellors. The social principles of Christianity justified the slavery of antiquity, glorifies the serfdom of the Middle Ages and are capable, in case of need, of defending the oppression of the proletariat, even if with somewhat doleful grimaces. The social principles of Christianity preach the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that the former may be charitable. The social principles of Christianity place the Consistorial Counsellor's compensation for all infamies in heaven, and thereby justify the continuation of these infamies on earth. The social principles of Christianity declare all the vile acts of the oppressors against the oppressed to be either a just punishment for original sin and other sins, or trials which the Lord, in his infinite wisdom, ordains for the redeemed. The social principles of Christianity preach cowardice, self-contempt, abasement, submissiveness and humbleness, in short, all the qualities of the rabble, and the proletariat, which will not permit itself to be treated as rabble, needs its courage, its self-confidence, its pride and its sense of independence even more than its bread. The social principles of Christianity are sneaking and hypocritical, and the proletariat is revolutionary. So much for the social principles of Christianity. (Marx & Engels 1976b:231)

20. See Wood's oversimplification and misunderstanding of Marx's approach to rights in: *Karl Marx*, 1981.

21. To understand this citation correctly, read the paragraph preceding this quote as well as the paragraph following it in: *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx and Engels (1989:87).

Marx asserts that Christianity views the realisation of human essence not in man's rational, conscious, and purposeful interactions with the natural and social world, directed at the enhancement of his own powers as an end, but rather inspires people to turn away from the world and make sacrifices.

Immanuel Kant

Before we look at Marx's critique of Kant's moral philosophy, let us in a nutshell, see what the essence of Kant's moral theory is. We know it rests on autonomous, rational free will. In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1997) writes that:

[T]he will is a kind of causality belonging to living beings in so far as they are rational, and freedom would be this property of such causality that it can be efficient, independently of foreign causes determining it; just as physical necessity is the property that the causality of all irrational beings has of being determined to activity by the influence of foreign causes. (p. 52)

Kant also reasons that we must 'act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means to and end' (Kant 1997:38). Marx, in his rejection of Kant's morality, writes:

Kant's good will fully corresponds to the impotence, depression and wretchedness of the German burghers, whose petty interests were never capable of developing into the common, national interests of a class. (Marx & Engels 1976a:193–194)

His further critique is that Kant's morality does not bring about social change:

Kant was satisfied with 'good will' alone, even if it remained entirely without result, and he transferred the *realisation* of this good will, the harmony between it and the needs and impulses of individuals, to *the world beyond*. (Marx & Engels 1976a:193)

Kant leaves the gap between 'is' and 'ought to' wide open:

[A]rguing that the total conformity of individuals' wills with the Moral Law can only be realized in the 'Kingdom of Ends', a condition which Kant argues cannot be realized in the material world. (Wills 2011:96)

According to Marx, and this is his second argument against Kant's morality, a person with a will that is 'wholly independent of foreign causes' simply does not exist in reality. In his critique against Hegel (and also political liberalism), Marx writes:

Is it not a delusion to substitute for the individual with his real motives, with multifarious social circumstances pressing upon him, the abstraction of 'free will' – one among many qualities of man for man himself. (Marx & Engels 1979:496–497)

Marx, in criticising French liberalism writes in *The German Ideology*:

The characteristic form which French liberalism, based on real class interests, assumed in Germany we find again in Kant. Neither he, nor the German middle class, whose whitewashing

spokesman he was, noticed that these theoretical ideas of the bourgeois had as their basis material interests and a will that was conditioned and determined by the material relations of production. Kant, therefore, separated this theoretical expression from the interests which it expressed; he made the materially motivated determinations of the will of the French bourgeois into pure self-determinations of 'free will', of the will in and for itself, of the human will, and so converted it into purely ideological conceptual determinations and moral postulates. (Marx & Engels 1976a:329)

Marx further writes²² in *The German Ideology*: 'The material life of individuals, which by no means depends merely on their "will" ... is the real basis of the state' (Marx & Engels 1976a:329).

Utilitarianism

Marx, again in *The German Ideology*, dismisses James Mill's moral philosophy as the 'complete union of the theory of utility with political economy' (Marx & Engels 1976a:412).

Marx has two principal objections to utilitarianism²³ namely:

[T]hat it illegitimately reduces a plethora of human social relations to just one relation of usefulness, and that it serves all too readily as a moral justification of the existing social order. (Wills 2011:106)

Marx writes in *The German Ideology*:

The apparent absurdity of merging all the manifold relations 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 monetary-commercial relation ... In Helvétius and Holbach one can already find an idealisation of this doctrine, which fully corresponds to the attitude of opposition adopted by the French bourgeoisie before the revolution. Holbach depicts the entire activity of individuals in their mutual intercourse, e.g., speech, love, etc., as a relation of utility and utilisation. Hence the actual relations that are presupposed here are speech, love²⁴, definite manifestations of definite qualities of individuals. Now these relations are supposed not to have the meaning peculiar to them but to be the expression and manifestation of some third relation attributed to them, the relation of utility and utilisation. This paraphrasing ceases to be meaningless and arbitrary only when these relations have validity for the individual not on their own account, not as spontaneous activity, but rather as disguises, though by no means disguises of the category of Utilisation, but of an actual third aim and relation which is called the relation of utility. (Marx & Engels 1976a:409)

22. See Karl Kautsky's 1906 book: *Ethics and the Materialist Conception of History* in which he 'develops a Marxist critique of Kantian morality. His work in this regard is largely a response to Bernstein's argument that Marx's theory needed to be supplemented by Kantian morality' (Wills 2011:99). Kautsky articulates the difference between Marx's and Kant's morality as follows: 'because Kant thinks that the Moral Law will always contradict human beings' own interests and desires, he does not see morality as a historical phenomenon that can pass away in the course of human social development. Kant instead defers the resolution of this contradiction to the "Realm of Ends," which cannot be realized except through God' (Wills 2011:100).

23. Marx 'addresses utilitarianism in the thought of Baron d'Holbach, Helvetius, Jeremy Bentham, and Mill. However, most of his criticism is aimed specifically at Jeremy Bentham, with whom Mill worked closely' (Wills 2011:101). Also see in this respect George Brenkert's 1975 article: 'Marx and Utilitarianism'.

24. See Marx's treatment of love: *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels (1975a:21).

As developed in the works of Mill²⁵ and Bentham (1843)/²⁶, utilitarianism, according to Marx, became:

[A] mere apologia²⁷ for the existing state of affairs, an attempt to prove that under existing conditions the mutual relations of people today are the most advantageous and generally useful. (Marx & Engels 1976a:413–414)

Mill attributed the following quote to Bentham, one of the important exponents of utilitarianism, namely that the latter is a call for ‘everybody to count for one, nobody for more than one’ (Mill 1969:257). Despite this, utilitarianism ‘turns out to be profoundly undemocratic in practice’ (Wills 2011:106).

Is Marx’s moral imperatives still relevant for us today?

Wills (2011) reasons that in:

[T]he light of unfolding political, social, economic and ecological crisis ... the time is ripe for a thorough and systematic analysis of Marx’s moral critique of class society, and moral argument for a society consciously oriented toward the satisfaction of human needs and development of human powers. (p. 1)

- I think, Marx’s moral theory still has pertinence to both political thinking and contemporary political practice. His moral imperatives can help us to address exploitation that still (often) lies at the heart of the capital society and political economy – for example the Transnational Corporations.
- Marx’s moral principles could also advance a substantial degree of economic equality among people – it presents a theoretical perspective on how the economy has a tendency to create patterns of geographically unequal development.
- It could be a critique of liberal democracy and the state as well as capitalism, particularly when their policies fail to make society better, fairer, or more conducive to human advancement and growth.
- Marx’s moral theory promotes the development of workers and trade unions to advocate for individual and socio-economic rights.
- Within Marx’s morality ‘there is a powerful account of human subjectivity and the potential for “sociability and creativity”’ (Lazarus 2016).
- There is (sometimes) a concern about ‘family values’ in communism – I briefly touch on this because it is so relevant for the world in which we live today. Engels says with regard to communism’s influence on the family:

It will make the relation between the sexes a purely private relation which concerns only the persons involved, and in which society has no call to interfere. It is able to do this because it abolishes private property and educates children communally, thus destroying the twin foundation of hitherto existing marriage –

25. Read more about Marx’s criticism of Mill in *Capital*, Marx and Engels (1988:159). Having said this Marx also agreed in certain respects with Mill’s moral vision of what type of society we should strive to build.

26. Marx’s opinion of Bentham was not only very critical in *The German Ideology* but also in his later writings such as *Capital*, Marx and Engels (1996:605, 65).

27. See Brenkert’s (1975) support of Marx in this respect: p. 431.

the dependence through private property of the wife upon the husband and of the children upon the parents. (Engels, *Principles of Communism*, Marx & Engels 1976b:354)

Engels also refers to the concern that communism will not only abolish marriage, but also introduce the so-called ‘community of women’:

Community of women is a relationship that belongs altogether to bourgeoisie society and is completely realised today in prostitution. But prostitution is rooted in private property and falls with it. Thus instead of introducing the community of women, communist organisation puts an end to it. (Engels, *Principles of Communism*, Marx & Engels 1976b:354)

Marx, in his response to the charge that communism will destroy the bourgeoisie family writes:

The bourgeoisie clap-trap about the family and education, about the hallowed co-relation of parent and child, becomes all the more disgusting, the more, by the action of Modern Industry, all the family ties among the proletarians are torn asunder, and their children transformed into simple articles of commerce and instruments of labour. (Manifesto of the Communist Party, Marx & Engels 1976b:502)

This is very insightful, as the family in the current world, is often the space of abuse and tyranny, especially regarding (vulnerable) children. We will all agree that children deserve greater devotion of time and resources to them – leading to stronger familial bonds based on love and caring.

- In many parts of the world capital punishment has not been abolished (cf. Jones 2022b) yet. Marx criticises this cruel practise in his article ‘Capital Punishment’ written in the *New York Daily Tribune* in 1853: ‘[I]t would be very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to establish any principle upon which the justice or expediency of capital punishment could be founded, in a society glorying in its civilization’ (Marx & Engels 1979:496). He further writes that ‘[P]unishment in general has been defended as a means either of ameliorating or of intimidating’ (Marx & Engels 1979:496) and ‘[P]lainly speaking, and dispensing with all paraphrases, punishment is nothing but a means of society to defend itself against the infraction of its vital conditions, whatever may be their character’ (Marx & Engels 1979:497). With regard to family values and capital punishment, as discussed, Marx wants to help us to organise society and live our lives concretely according to who we essentially are and have developed. For Marx this would be ‘rich’ and ‘all-sided’ flourishing individuals who satisfy their needs.
- With all our environmental challenges, often linked to a capitalist economy which is at odds with the environment, one can fruitfully revisit Marx’s ecological view, as encapsulated in the following citation: ‘Even an entire society, a nation, or all simultaneously existing societies taken together, are not owners of the earth. They are simply its possessors, its beneficiaries, and have to bequeath it in an improved state to succeeding generations’ (Butler 2009). Marx and Engels could be ranked ‘among the most advanced environmentalists of their day’ (Butler 2009).

- Marx and Engels were not only political theorists or philosophers, but they were also very dedicated activists. They made theory real – and significant. In 1845, Marx wrote that the philosophers interpret the world in various ways, but it must be changed (Butler 2009). Activism without becoming violent, is often needed to change the world.

Conclusion

In this article, I reflected on Karl Marx's moral thinking as it emerged throughout his intellectual career. This study more particularly discussed Marx's views of materialism; his perspectives on human nature, morality, and labour, as well as on human nature and needs; his reasoning of alienation under capitalism, and his arguments for communism; his objective, universal, and historical view of morality; and his critique of (human) rights, Christianity, Kant, and utilitarianism. Lastly the question, 'Is Marx's moral imperatives still relevant for us today?', is asked and briefly discussed.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no financial or personal relationship(s) that may have inappropriately influenced them in writing this article.

Author's contributions

The author declared sole authorship of this article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human participants.

Funding information

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and are the product of professional research. It does not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated institution, funder, agency, or that of the publisher. The author is responsible for this article's results, findings, and content.

References

- Abbey, R., 2002, 'Young Karl does handstands: A reply to Daniel Brudney', *Political Theory* 30(1), 150–155. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591702030001007>
- Bentham, J., 1843, *Principles of the civil code*, W. Tait, Edinburgh.
- Brenkert, G.G., 1975, 'Marx and utilitarianism', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 5(3), 421–434. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1975.10716121>
- Butler, S., 2009, *Karl Marx, ecologist, ecosocialism or barbarism: There is no third way, climate and capitalism*, viewed 03 October 2022, from <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2009/03/02/karl-marx-ecologist/>.
- Churchich, N., 1994, *Marxism and morality: A critical examination of Marxist ethics*, James Clarke & Co., Cambridge.
- Cohen, G.A., 1988, *History, labour, and freedom: Themes from Marx*, Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Hegel's Dialectics, Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2020, viewed 25 July 2022, from <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-dialectics/>.
- Jones, C., 2022a, 'South Africa is trapped again: What kind of leaders can set the country free', *The Conversation*, 31 July 2022, n.p.
- Jones, C., 2022b, 'Death penalty: A human rights issue for South Africa', in T. Corrigan (ed.), *Human rights in the contemporary world*, pp. 55–68, IntechOpen, London.
- Kamenka, E., 1962, *The ethical foundations of marxism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston.
- Kant, I., 1997, 'Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals', in M. Gregor (ed.), *Cambridge texts in the history of philosophy*, pp. 1–30, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Kautsky, K., 1906, *Ethics and the materialist conception of history*, Transl. J. Askev, Charles H. Kerr & Company, Chicago, IL.
- Lawrence, J. & Jost, J., 2007, 'Why Marx left philosophy for social science', *Theory & Psychology* 17, 297–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354307075047>
- Lazarus, M., 2016, 'Constructing Marxist ethics: Critique, normativity, praxis', *Contemporary Political Theory* 15, 472–476. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41296-016-0003-0>
- Lebowitz, M., 2010, *The socialist alternative: Real human development*, Monthly Review Press, New York, NY.
- Marx, K., 1902, *The difference between the democritean and epicurean philosophy of nature*, Forgotten Books, London.
- Marx, K., 1993, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in T. Delaney & Zodiac (eds.), *Economic Works, 1857–1861, Marx and Engels Collected Works*, vol. 29, n.p., viewed n.d., from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/>.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1975a, *Collected works*, vol. 3, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1975b, *Collected works*, vol. 4, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1976a, *Collected works*, vol. 5, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1976b, *Collected works*, vol. 6, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1977, *Collected works*, vol. 9, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1979, *Collected works*, vol.11, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1986a, *Collected works*, vol. 15, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1986b, *Collected works*, vol. 28, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1988, *Collected works*, vol. 30, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1989, *Collected works*, vol. 24, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1996, *Collected works*, vol. 35, Lawrence Wishart, London.
- Mészáros, I., 1975, *Marx's theory of alienation*, Merlin Press, London.
- Mill, J., 1969, *The collected works of John Stuart Mill*, vol. X, University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, Toronto.
- Mills, C.W., 1994, 'Marxism, "Ideology," and Moral Objectivism', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 24(3), 373–393. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.1994.10717375>
- Stirner, M., 1995, *The ego and ts own*, transl. D. Leopold, Cambridge University Press, New York, NY.
- Van den Heever, J. & Jones, C., 2019, 'The evolution of morality', in J. Van den Heever & C. Jones (eds.), *Moral issues in the natural sciences and technologies*, pp. 1–26, AOSIS, Cape Town.
- West, C., 1991, *The ethical dimensions of Marxist thought*, Monthly Review Press, New York, NY.
- Wills, V., 2011, 'Marx and morality', Graduate Faculty of the Kenneth P. Dietrich School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh, US.
- Wood, A., 1981, *Karl Marx, The Arguments of the Philosophers*, ed. T. Honderich, Routledge & Kegan Paul, Boston, MA.