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A Swerving Ethics:
Marx's Epicurean Atomism and Levinasian Ethics

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ABSTRACT: Ethical differences, often related to religious or materialist commitments, lie at the heart of an increasingly divided U.S. political landscape. This paper places Karl Marx's materialist philosophy in conversation with the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in order to articulate an ethical discourse that might engage materialist as well as religious commitments. Marx's emphasis on Epicurean atomism and "the swerve" in his doctoral dissertation lays the groundwork for a radical alternative to Western philosophical thought and its practical outcomes, particularly political ideals like subjectivity, freedom, and justice. With his commitment to the swerve, Marx grounds human self-consciousness and freedom in the pre- or non-ontological movement of materiality. While the swerve provides ontological grounding for human freedom, it also opens up new problems, specifically with respect to ethics. Through a comparison of Emmanuel Levinas's description of "hypostasis" in his book *Existence and Existents*, with Marx's characterization of the swerve, I will show that Levinas articulates a pre-ontological ethics that can uphold Marx's commitment to the swerve while also opening a path for ethical reflection. This ethical reflection, predicated on encounter with the "Other," provides an ambiguity conducive to both materialist and religious ethical engagement.

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In his *Democracy and Tradition*, Jeffrey Stout argues that "the social practices that matter most directly to democracy...are the discursive practices of ethical deliberation and political debate."[1] While political

[1] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 305.

liberalism imagines that religious commitments can be sidelined for political debate, ethical differences seem to immediately implicate the "conversation stopper"[2] of religious belief, along with its rationalist and/or materialist[3] counterparts. Given the increasing divisiveness of the post-2016 U.S. political landscape, the goal of this paper is to pursue a route for reconfiguring ethics with the hope that people with materialist and religious commitments might re-engage in the ethical deliberation and political debate necessary for healthy democracy. In this direction, this essay will address two key problems. First, materialist commitments problematize traditional ethics, since the free, autonomous individual is subject to no universal or transcendental laws. On the other hand, religious commitments assume a calling into question of freedom by particularist authorities not shared by others outside of their community. With this overarching goal in mind, this paper will examine the religiously ambiguous ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas in conversation with Karl Marx's dialectical materialism[4] as an avenue for bridging political divides between religious and materialist perspectives.

Karl Marx's dissertation on Epicurean atomism presents a materialist argument for human freedom and self-consciousness which pervades the whole of his political economic works. The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, alternatively, is often read as a pseudo-religious or transcendental philosophy incompatible with materialism, including that of Marx's dissertation. In this paper, I will detail the striking similarities between Marx's dissertation and Levinas's early works, with emphasis on his *Existence and Existents*. Levinasian "ethics as first philosophy" seeks the pre-ontological conditions for human subjectivity in a manner that reflects

[2] Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-Stopper," *Common Knowledge* 3, no.1 (1994): 1-6.

[3] With reference to the U.S. political context, I utilize "materialist" to include individuals and communities who identify as rationalist, atheist, and/or secularist. This would essentially include any individual or community who would reject spiritual or ecclesial authority as acceptable grounds for political debate.

[4] This essay will primarily treat Marx as a philosopher rather than as a purely political theorist. There are many versions and types of Marxist political praxis, and many of those would discredit Stout's definition of democratic deliberation and debate as bourgeois protection of the status quo. Nevertheless, Marx's philosophical contributions deserve further consideration, and it is my view that these contributions can positively impact the post-2016 U.S. political landscape. The treatment of Marx in this essay is determined, in part, by this context.

the motions of Epicurean atomism as described by Marx. When read in this light, Levinasian ethics can be understood as a pre-ontological ethics drawing from a materialist, atomistic commitment that offers a critical rearticulation of ethics within atomistic materialism. At the same time, the confrontation with otherness at the heart of Levinasian ethics, with its ambiguous emphasis on "transcendence," opens space for religious ethical engagement.

Hypostasis and the Swerve

In his doctoral dissertation, Marx compares the atomistic philosophies of Epicurus and Democritus, and he sides with Epicurus as the perfecter of atomism. Marx explains that "Epicurus assumes a *threefold* motion of the atoms in the void. One motion is the *fall in a straight line*, the second originates in the *deviation* of the atom *from the straight line*, and the third is established through the *repulsion of the many atoms*."[5] The distinguishing feature of Epicurean atomism is this deviation or "the swerve." Marx follows the Roman poet Lucretius, whom Marx says is "the only one in general of all the ancients who has understood Epicurean physics,"[6] when Lucretius argues that matter itself is "apt to swerve."[7] Other ancient thinkers like Cicero derided Epicurus for lacking an efficient cause of repulsion, wherein atoms collide to form sensuous objects, but the swerve itself *is* the cause. Atoms simply move; movement is a feature of matter. No further cause is necessary or needed.

Marx further describes the swerve through Hegelian language of negation. "Just as the point is negated [*aufgehoben*] in the line, so is every falling body negated in the straight line it describes," and therefore the atom "surrenders its individuality [*Enzelheit*]" in the motions of falling and repulsion.[8] Considered in this way, "if the void is imagined as a spatial void, then the atom is the *immediate negation of abstract space*, hence a *spatial point*," and a "negation of all relativity, of all relation to another mode of being."[9] The atom swerves away from the straight-line motion of its fall

[5] Karl Marx, *The First Writings of Karl Marx* (Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, Puty, 2006), 108.

[6] Ibid., 111.

[7] Titus Lucretius Carus, *On the Nature of Things* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2001), 41.

[8] Marx, *First Writings*, 111.

through the void, and thereby negates that motion. In the motion of repulsion, the atoms collide to create sensuous objects, which negate the singular atom. Because the atoms are in constant motion, the appearance of the sensuous object is "real" in a way that the atom is not, just as a line negates a singular point in motion.[10] This determines the distinction Marx finds between Epicurus and Democritus: whereas Democritus commits himself to the unknowability of the atom (and therefore to dogged pursuit of empirical discovery) Epicurus cares only for objective appearance, since there is no further mystery to be found with the atom.

From Marx's description of Epicurean atomism, we can now compare his atomism to what Emmanuel Levinas describes in his early work *Existence and Existents*. I hope to show that the two thinkers share striking similarities in their description of concepts roughly akin to the void and the swerve, in addition to a similar description of subjectivity or self-consciousness based on the swerve. While the language differs between the two thinkers, I will argue that the concepts and the motions described warrant a thorough comparison, and ultimately shows that Levinas grounds his ethical philosophy in a materialist ontology directly compatible with Marx's commitment to atomism.

Levinas's description of the *il y a* or the "there is" functions as the conceptual equivalent to "the void." The "term *there is*" designates "being in general," or the "impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable 'consummation' of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself."[11] Levinas further describes being as "a field of forces, like a heavy atmosphere belonging to no one,"[12] which is "like a density of the void, like

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[9] Ibid., 111-112.

[10] By way of example, I am sitting in a run-of-the-mill office chair. It is a "chair," but it is composed of cushions, plastics, metal legs, screws, etc. When I say "chair," the screws are *negated* in the object that is the chair. In the same sense, atoms collide and combine to make up a "sensuous object" (any, every "object" we might perceive, including the chair). Democritus commits himself to the unknowability of the atom, meaning that he cannot say "chair," since he does not know its composition down to the screws, or even the atoms and protons and quarks of the screw. Epicurus, on the other hand, can simply affirm the "chair" as an existing sensuous object. All of the pieces (down to and including the protons, quarks, etc.that compose the screw) are "negated" in the chair. According Epicurus, we can therefore say "chair" in a way that Democritus cannot.

[11] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2001), 52.

[12] Ibid., 53.

a murmur of silence. There is nothing, but there is being."[13] This language seems somewhat poetic or even paradoxical, but its purpose is to describe the void not as nothingness, but as formless and shapeless materiality. Levinas emphasizes this point partly as a response to Heidegger, in that there is no escape from materiality.[14] The *il y a* "has 'no exits,'" and this shows "the impossibility of death,"[15] in that death does not entail nothingness, but merely a material return to Being in general. Levinas therefore articulates the *il y a* as dense, formless, anonymous Being that conceptually functions as a material "void."

A singular being or existent pushes away from Existence or Being in general, and Levinas refers to the moment as "hypostasis." Levinas defines "hypostasis" as "the apparition of a substantive, [which] is not only the apparition of a new grammatical category; it signifies the suspension of the anonymous *there is*, the apparition of a private domain, of a noun."[16] To use Marx's language, the existent *negates* anonymous being in the hypostasis, in the same way that the swerve negates motion in the void. In the hypostasis, the existent "negates all relativity," in Marx's language, quite specifically in the sense that it negates the utter anonymity of the *il y a*. The hypostasis therefore expresses the constitution of an existent from the void of the *il y a* as a *purely material* movement. Levinas clarifies that "the relation between beings and Being does not link up two independent terms," since "'a being' has already made a contract with Being; it cannot be isolated from it. It is. It already exercises over Being the domination a subject exercises over its attributes."[17] The swerve and the hypostasis both negate or act against the formless void, and it is this movement that results in existents as sensuous objects.

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[13] Ibid., 59.

[14] "Death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. Being towards this possibility discloses to Dasein its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, in which its very Being is the issue. Here it can become manifest to Dasein that in this distinctive possibility of its own self, it has been wrenched away from the 'they.' This means that in anticipation any Dasein can have wrenched itself away from the 'they' already. But when one understands that this is something which Dasein 'can' have done, this only reveals its factical lostness in the everydayness of the they-self." Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 307.

[15] Levinas, *Existence and Existents,* 56.

[16] Ibid., 83.

[17] Ibid., 1.

Levinas furthermore approaches the moment of hypostasis as a "pure verb"[18] that is the event of an existent appearing from Existence. Levinas utilizes the language of pure verb to show the difficulty of such a description; the hypostasis precedes objectivity and therefore language itself. Lucretius deals with the same problem with the swerve, in that if there was a moment when an atom first swerved, there would need to be a cause for that occurrence. Instead, since the atom is "apt to swerve," atoms have *always been swerving* and *precede time itself*. The "when" of the swerve is therefore entirely indeterminate. Hypostasis as pure verb functions in the same manner, though in a linguistic or cognitive register. Levinas seems to trace the exact problem Lucretius solves, when he determines that "the difficulty of separating Being from beings," is "due to the habit of situating the instant, the atom of time, outside of any event."[19] This primordial event or motion is the hypostasis from which time itself becomes possible.

The Swerve and Subjectivity

The ultimate aim of Marx's analysis of Epicurean atomism is not just the intricate inner-workings of atomistic philosophy, but the nature of self-consciousness, subjectivity, and human freedom. In the swerve, Epicurus gives the concept of the atom "pure form-determination" and "pure individuality" wherein "all determinations are immediate."[20] "Immediate determination" here means *self-determination*, i.e. there are no other causes than the swerve itself, and "opposite determinations are therefore opposed to one another as immediate realities."[21] Marx emphasizes that "the declination of the atom" (the swerve) expresses a law which "goes through the whole Epicurean philosophy,"[22] with the result that "the entire Epicurean philosophy swerves away from the restrictive mode of being wherever the concept of abstract individuality, self-sufficiency and negation of all relation to other things must be represented in its

[18] Ibid., 82.

[19] Ibid., 1.

[20] Marx, *First Writings*, 112.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Ibid., 114.

existence."[23] The concept of the swerve itself swerves away from philosophies that constrict freedom according to deterministic laws.

Marx highlights Epicurus's emphasis on individuality free from determination by detailing how Epicurus reinforced his commitment to ataraxy[24] in his response to theories of meteors. As Marx explains, theories of meteors popular among his Greek contemporaries offered Epicurus a tempting proof for his atomic theory, in that the meteors' "only action is motion, and, separated by empty space, they swerve from the straight line, and form a system of repulsion and attraction while at the same time preserving their own independence and also, finally, generating time out of themselves as the form of their appearance. *The heavenly bodies are therefore the atoms become real*."[25] Despite this provocative evidence in support of his philosophy, Epicurus *rejects* this theory of meteors. If the atom were to become an independent, eternal reality in the form of meteors, then they would represent a universal. Epicurus thus contends "against those who explain the heavenly bodies *haplos* [simply, absolutely] that is, in one particular way, for the One is the Necessary and that which is Independent-in-itself."[26] Marx argues that this action exposes "Epicurus' true principle, abstract-individual self-consciousness,"[27] based on the reasoning that "since eternity of the heavenly bodies would disturb the ataraxy of self-consciousness, it is a necessary, a stringent consequence that they are not eternal."[28] Thus, with Epicurus, "*atomistics* with all its contradictions has been carried through and completed *as the natural science of self-consciousness*. The self-consciousness under the form of abstract individuality is an absolute principle."[29]

Commitment to the swerve guides Marx to famously invert Hegel's dialectical idealism into a dialectical materialism. According to Marx, his

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[23] Ibid., 115.

[24] "Ataraxy" here means the quality of being undisturbed or unanxious. Epicurus utilizes the concept of "ataraxy" in opposition to philosophies that posit gods and/or forces that determine human existence and necessitate certain actions in service to those greater gods or forces.

[25] Marx, *First Writings*, 142. Emphasis original.

[26] Ibid., 144.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Ibid., 141.

[29] Ibid., 146. Emphasis original.

"dialectical method is, in its foundations, not only different from the Hegelian, but exactly opposite to it," in that the driving force of the dialectic is not Idea, but matter.[30] Dialectical materialism negates Hegel's idealism with the nuance of *aufhebung*, in that Marx's philosophy preserves many of Hegel's concepts and insights even as it transcends or cancels them. Marx critiques Hegel for falling "into the illusion of conceiving the real as the product of thought concentrating itself, probing its own depths, and unfolding itself out of itself, by itself," when in reality "the method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind."[31]

As an extension of his dialectical materialism, Marx's critique of political economy begins with "material conditions of life," which again overturns many of Hegel's categories.[32] This inversion is most clear with the three stages of society outlined by Hegel. Whereas Hegel places the state at the top, with civil society mediating between the family and individual, Marx focuses on civil society. "Civil society" names the totality of material and social relations between members of society, including issues surrounding property and production. By starting with these material relations, Marx analyzes the economic conditions of society as a means to understand the political, which is an expression of the material relations in civil society.

Marx extends this analysis in *The German Ideology* as a means for understanding *class* and how class relations provide the material reality for the political. In society, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society is at the same time its ruling intellectual force," and "the ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships."[33] While Hegel's philosophy seems to make freedom central

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[30] Karl Marx, *Capital: Volume 1: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. by Ben Fowkes, reprint edition. (New York: Penguin Classics, 1992), 102.

[31] Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans.by Martin Nicolaus, reprint edition (London: Penguin Classics, 1993), 101.

[32] Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Selected Writings, 2nd Edition*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 425.

[33] Ibid., 192.

to society, this abstracted freedom overlooks the material relations between members of society. This freedom is only accessible to certain segments of the population, however, and the concerns of that free and ruling class subjugate all other members of society.

By starting with matter rather than the Idea, Marx rejects Hegel's conception of the Spirit. As Marx explains in *The Holy Family*, "Hegel's conception of history assumes an Abstract or Absolute Spirit which develops in such a way that mankind is a mere mass bearing it," and "the history of mankind becomes the history of the abstract spirit of mankind."[34] For Hegel, reason provides access to the Spirit, and therefore humanity is ultimately *immaterial*, as immaterial reason subjugates the material aspects of human life. By grounding human freedom in the swerve, rather than the idea, Marx offers a pre- or non-ontological basis for freedom. Freedom, for Marx, does not rely on belief or affirmation of any ideas. Materiality, including humanity, simply *is* free.

While Levinas diverges from Marx's understanding of freedom (which will be crucial for the concluding section of this paper), the two concepts of consciousness and and escape warrant comparison with Marx. In regard to the former, Levinas argues that "consciousness is precisely a sincerity,"[35] and what characterizes being in the world is the sincerity of intentions—the self-sufficiency of the world and contentment."[36] The point Levinas makes here is that consciousness *always* extends from material embodiment. Levinas once again distinguishes his philosophy from Heidegger, in that Heidegger "failed to recognize the essentially secular nature of being in the world and the sincerity of intentions. Not everything that is given in the world is a tool."[37] Food and drink are not "used" by human subjects; food and drink in an essential way *constitute consciousness*.

From this perspective, Heidegger better resembles Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant, despite Heidegger's seeming emphasis on embodiment for *Dasein*.[38] Ultimately, *Dasein* remains distinguishable from

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[34] Ibid., 158.

[35] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 29.

[36] Ibid., 33.

[37] Ibid., 34.

[38] Heidegger begins his pursuit of Being by defining "*Dasein*" (literally "being-there"),

other material objects, which are tools or objects to be used by *Dasein*. Alternatively, Marx and Levinas wholly affirm the material quality of the human subject. Unlike *Dasein*, the Marxian or Levinasian subject is *not* distinguishable from other material objects in Heidegger's sense. There is no consciousness without a living, breathing human being. Levinas in fact emphasizes this sincerity as "the great force of Marxist philosophy," in its "ability to avoid completely the hypocrisy of sermons" and in the "essential sincerity"[39] with regard to the concrete conditions necessary for human subjectivity. Contra Heidegger, Levinas asserts that "our existence in the world, with its desires and everyday agitation, is then not an immense fraud, a fall into inauthenticity, an evasion of our deepest destiny. It is but the amplification of that resistance against anonymous and fateful being by which existence becomes consciousness."[40]

This distinction from Heidegger beckons toward "escape," a crucial motion in Levinas's philosophy that compares to Marx's understanding of the swerve as a movement away from Being. Marx clarifies this point in the dissertation when he states that "abstract individuality is freedom *from* being, not freedom in being."[41] It is this "freedom from being," the swerve from the turbulent, chaotic void to particularity, that roughly correlates to "escape." In his early essay *On Escape*, Levinas describes "escape" as "the need to get out of oneself, that is, *to break that most radical and unalterably binding of chains, the fact that the I [moi] is oneself [soi-même].*"[42] In contradistinction to Heidegger's philosophy, in which the self seeks *more* Being in order to live authentically, Levinas proposes that the subject has *too much* of Being, and this reality requires some form of "escape." The subject needs "*excendence*," a neologism that undercuts Heidegger's emphasis on death (wherein the possibility of impossibility

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which is the human being capable of thinking (about) Being. Heidegger defines *Dasein*: "This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term 'Dasein'. If we are to formulate our question explicitly and transparently, we must first give a proper explication of an entity (Dasein), with regard to its Being." Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 27.

[39] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 37.

[40] Ibid., 44.

[41] Marx, *First Writings*, 130-131. Emphasis added.

[42] Emmanuel Levinas, *On Escape*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 55. Emphasis original.

inherent to one's inevitable death provides the engine for a virile "authenticity") as a faulty "solution," because death is "not a[n] exit."[43] The motion of "escape," for Levinas as for Marx, distinguishes both from the vast majority of Western philosophy, in that most of Western philosophy posits a "lack-fill" motion. With this motion, the human subject *lacks* Being (Heidegger), Reason (Kant, Plato etc.), or God (Christianity, religion), and the goal of philosophy is to *fill* the subject with ever more. Levinas and Marx both reject these models.

Marx and Ethics

Marx's articulation of the swerve and subjectivity rejects traditional conceptions of ethics, in the sense that traditional ethics presume the necessity of certain actions and the limitations of freedom in certain contexts. This traditional conception of ethics undergirds bourgeois political subjectivity, including that of individual rights (the individual *ought not* kill another individual, for they are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," as argued in the United States *Declaration of Independence.*[44] In this section, I will trace Marx's conception of ethics throughout the development of his philosophical perspective. The commitment to the swerve poses a crucial question: If there are no universal, necessary laws, how can there even be a definition of "justice" outside of pure exertion of one's freedom?

In his 1988 book *Marx and Ethics*, Philip Kain reports the various strains of thought regarding Marx, Marxism, and ethics, while presenting an argument for a number of key shifts in Marx's ethical thinking. According to Kain, the early Marx "thinks morality can play a real role in transforming the world", then with *The German Ideology* and *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx "rejects morality as ideological illusion." [45] Finally, in *The Grundrisse* and *Capital*, "morality is no longer ideological illusion, but nevertheless in capitalist society it is incapable of transforming the world or promoting revolution."[46] The early Marx grapples with Hegel,

[43] Levinas, *On Escape*, 54.

[44] "The Declaration of Independence: Full Text." Accessed May 27, 2019. http://www.ushistory.org/declaration/document/.

[45] Philip J. Kain, *Marx and Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 12.

[46] Ibid., 12.

whose “theory of freedom is based on his concept of free will,”[47] which is, ultimately, “the absolute Idea.”[48] Marx’s commitment to the swerve immanentizes Hegelian free will and reorients freedom into a materialist framework. At the same time, this adaptation of Hegelian thought negates all necessity, or the view that history moves toward a cohesive end or Idea. This rejection of "necessity" presents an unanswered question at the center of Marx’s commitment to philosophy as praxis. Without necessity, there can be no “ought not,” as in bourgeois ethics. The swerve’s response to “Thou shalt not kill” is “why not?”

Kain frames Marx’s commitment to philosophy as praxis through a comparison to Kant, in that for Marx it is a “‘categorical imperative’ to overthrow all relations in which man is not ‘the highest being for man,’” and “all institutions which treat humans merely as means must be transformed in a revolutionary way.”[49] This imperative requires a determination of "the highest being for man," or a theory of human essence to serve as a norm for overthrowing unjust institutions. Such a determination is untenable, however, from a commitment to the swerve, as it reintroduces necessity. Marx attempts a correction of this issue in *The German Ideology*, where he works out historical materialism to show that human consciousness is “conditioned not by an essence but by physical organization, namely, that humans begin to produce their own means of subsistence.”[50] Human consciousness, what differentiates humans from other animals, is a result of changes in material production, i.e., humans "produce their own means of subsistence." Marx comes to reject “the Kantian concept of freedom as self-determination” and instead “accepts only the concept of freedom as control.”[51] Kain calls this a “soft” determinism,[52] which recognizes the physical, material conditions necessary for human action and thought. Human thought is conditioned by the processes of material production, but are also capable of rationally

[47] Andreas Arndt, “Hegel, Marx and Freedom,” *Revista Opinião Filosófica* 7, no. 1 (2017): 206.

[48] Ibid., 207.

[49] Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, 39.

[50] Ibid., 85.

[51] Ibid., 112.

[52] Ibid., 119.

controlling those processes to suit their ends. It is therefore "not necessary to act for the universal or to be self-determined in order to be free; we need only be in control,"[53] because "control means freedom."[54] Marx further develops this approach in *The Grundrisse* and *Capital*.

In Marx's mature view of communism, "socialized individuals become free in a concrete sense—they control their social and natural world so as to achieve a 'full and free development' by providing for each in accordance with their needs."[55] The capitalist mode of production provides the material conditions for bourgeois ideals like "equality" and "freedom" as self-determination, and the only way to confront or change those ideals is by changing the mode of production. This drives Marx to "take flight into the misty realm of religion,"[56] as he describes the fetishistic abstraction at play in traditional political economics. In this mode of production, "market laws set in and come to control the exchange of products independently of the will or consciousness of the producers,"[57] and humans relinquish their freedom to forces outside of their control. Kain concludes by referencing Marx's dissertation and his relation to Epicurus, for whom "the task of science was to rid the world of determinism so as to make *ataraxia*, or peace of mind, possible."[58] Science, as rational control of productive forces, helps bring about the communist ideal, then "at that point theoretical science can wither away and consciousness, including moral consciousness, can take over."[59]

Though Kain argues that moral consciousness can play a role in communist society, the possibility of *any* imposed limit to human freedom remains untenable. This ethical conundrum pervades Marx's writings and his vision for communist society. Jan Kandiyali helpfully details the problem of freedom and necessity, as Marx "oscillates" between two modes of thought in regard to necessary labour.[60] The more traditional philosophical

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[53] Ibid., 114.

[54] Ibid., 112.

[55] Ibid., 154.

[56] Marx, *Capital*, 165.

[57] Kain, *Marx and Ethics*, 183.

[58] Ibid., 198.

[59] Ibid.

[60] Jan Kandiyali, "Freedom and Necessity in Marx's Account of Communism," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (2014): 119.

view, characteristic of Aristotle and Kant, is that “freedom from work is necessary if human beings are to develop the highest aspects of their nature,”[61] whereas Hegel, with his master-slave dialectic, finds a degree of freedom in labour, wherein the “slave comes to control his own desires.”[62] Marx oscillates between these two views, sometimes emphasizing the possibility of unalienated necessary labour, and sometimes leisure time in the communist society. This problem mirrors the earlier mentioned issue of freedom as "self-determination," as leisure time fulfills this role, while necessary labour reflects the rational control of production necessary for societal reproduction. Kandiyali frames these alternatives as the “Kantian way” of “freedom as self-determination” and the “Aristotelian way” of “freedom as self-realization,” or “the development of one’s distinctly human capacities and potentialities.”[63] To add to this analysis, the problem seems to stem from Marx’s commitment to the absolute freedom of the swerve on one hand, and on the other hand, his commitment to rational control of production (which amounts to limitations on human freedom).

David Bholat gets to the core of this ethical quandary when he describes how “the project of many Marxist commentators post-1989 has been to resituate Marx as another, but more radical, Enlightenment philosopher,” but that “Marx’s writings provide a point of departure for a post-Enlightenment, postliberal democratic politics.”[64] In my view, Marx struggled to identify something like an "ethics" (though not exactly of the traditional philosophical mode) that could guide or limit human freedom. Indeed, something like "ethics" would seem a necessary condition for critiquing the capitalist mode of production central to his work. This is, at the same time, at odds with Marx’s commitment to the swerve as the material condition of self-consciousness and human freedom. Bholat argues that “ it is the nonliberal, nonhumanist dimensions of Marx’s thought that deserve rethinking,” which “means that the argument for human equality, rather than simply needing a new foundation, itself needs to be critically examined.”[65] Arguments for human equality typically resort

[61] Ibid., 117.

[62] Ibid.

[63] Ibid., 109.

[64] David M. Bholat, “Beyond Equality,” *Rethinking Marxism* 22, no. 2 (2010): 275.

to immaterial ideals in the vein of Kant or Hegel. Marx's grounding of freedom in the swerve provides a "nonliberal, nonhumanist" articulation of freedom. Nevertheless, Marxism short-circuits due to the disconnect between atomistic materialism and traditional ethics. It is in light of this possibility, and the foregoing argument for compatibility between the philosophy of Levinas and Marx's materialism, that I will argue that Levinasian ethics grounds ethics in a primordial encounter with the Other.

The Swerve and the Ethical Moment

While some scholars have attempted to compare Levinasian ethics with Marx's critique of liberal norms and values, few have drawn the comparison back to the Epicurean atomism of Marx's dissertation. Thus, while Serap Kayatekin and Jack Amariglio[66] offer a solid read of Levinasian ethics in relation to Marx's early writings, there still seems to be a fatal disconnect between Levinas and Marx, particularly given Marx's anti-religious commitments against abstraction and Levinas's easily misinterpreted religious references. Kayatekin and Amariglio are right to compare Levinas's suspicion of "the violent potential in Western ontology's search for sameness" with Marx's criticism of "bourgeois humanism's sameness under individualism, freedom, and equality,"[67] but a shared criticism amounts to little if the solutions differ so greatly. In this section, I will attempt to ground Levinasian ethics in the three motions of the swerve, in order to show that Levinas works within a materialist framework compatible with Marx's commitment to the swerve.

Marx writes in the dissertation, "Epicurus assumes a *threefold* motion of the atoms in the void. One motion is the *fall in a straight line*, the second originates in the *deviation* of the atom *from the straight line*, and the third is established through the *repulsion of the many atoms*."[68] When, in *Existence and Existents*, Levinas uses "pausal" language of "lag," "fatigue," and "indolence," these words describe a moment situated roughly between the first and second motions of the atom. As Levinas

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[65] Ibid., 281.

[66] Serap A. Kayatekin and Jack Amariglio, "Reading Marx with Levinas," *Rethinking Marxism* 28, no. 3-4 (2016): 479-499.

[67] Ibid., 496.

[68] Marx, *First Writings*, 108.

explains, “indolence, as a recoil before action, is a hesitation before existence, an indolence about existing.”[69] Through this poignant language, Levinas describes a feeling of intense compulsion from the *il y a*, or the motion in the void. Though the swerve allows for an articulation of ontological primacy of motion in relation to traditional Western philosophy, in this context the swerve is not *just* motion, but also a "lag," as resistance to the constant, determinative motion of the void that determines and overwhelms the atom as a massive force. Levinas further clarifies the pausal moment, in that “indolence is an impossibility of beginning, or, if one prefers, it is the effecting of beginning,”[70] and “fatigue marks a delay with respect to oneself and with respect to the present...Effort is an effort of the present that lags behind the present.”[71] The pausal moment marks resistance to the overwhelming movement of Being and opens a new beginning of a self-conscious movement that swerves away from the void.

This movement still does not result, however, in the escape Levinas seeks: “this stepping back is not a liberation. It is as though one had given more slack rope to a prisoner without untying him.”[72] Likewise for Marx, not the swerve but “repulsion *is the first form of self-consciousness*,” where “in the repulsion of the atoms, therefore, their materiality, which was posited in the fall in a straight line, and the form-determination, are united synthetically.”[73] On this point, Marx uses language most strikingly similar to Levinas when he describes how “man ceases to be a product of nature only when the other being to which he relates himself is not a different existence but is itself an individual human being.”[74] It is the relation between the swerving atom, or the free human, and the other human that opens the possibility for escape. Levinas emphasizes, however, that this relation is *not* equal or same: “the Other as other is not only an *alter ego*. He is what I am not: he is the weak one whereas I am the strong one; he is

[69] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 15.

[70] Ibid., 13.

[71] Ibid., 20.

[72] Ibid., 89.

[73] Marx, *First Writings*, 117.

[74] Ibid.

the poor one, 'the widow and the orphan'...Or else the other is the stranger, the enemy and the powerful one. What is essential is that he has these qualities by virtue of his very alterity. Intersubjective space is initially asymmetrical."[75] This "asymmetrical intersubjectivity" opens the "possibility of being fecund,"[76] which in the case of the atom means the creation of sensuous objects, and in the case of the human subject physical reproduction through a child, or the relations of society.

This pausal moment and the relation to the other causes Levinas to cast freedom in a way that contrasts to Marx's self-determination or abstract individuality. Levinas argues that "freedom of consciousness is not without conditions,"[77] "the freedom of the present is not light like grace, but is a weight and a responsibility. It is articulated in a positive enchainment to one's self."[78] Freedom is conditioned by the embodied context of the human subject, and as such freedom is always limited by those conditions. This is the point that Marx so effectively asserts in his broader political economic theory, but that he struggles to articulate on an individual level. Levinas's paradoxical freedom (that responsibility conditions freedom) provides the components for solving the ethical quandaries in Marx's philosophy without either reverting to liberal ideals or the outright rejection of human freedom.

Unlike the virile freedom of traditional philosophy, including that of Marx, the human subject in Levinasian ethics experiences freedom "called into question" by the Other. In the encounter with the Other, the Other is "the free one. Over him I have no *power*...He is not wholly in my site."[79] The Other constantly *exceeds* my site because the Other is infinite, and it is this encounter with infinity that both calls the subject's freedom into question and provides the possibility for escape from enchainment to the self. It is this point that invites common ground between materialist and religious commitments, for the *from whence* of the infinite remains ambiguous and unanswered. Either/or, encounter with the Other

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[75] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 98.

[76] Ibid., 100.

[77] Ibid., 84.

[78] Ibid., 89.

[79] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 2016), 39.

commands the subject to consider the myriad contingencies and the fundamental responsibility at play in the encounter.

Levinas, the Other, and Religion

The "Other" correlates with the motion of repulsion in Marx's atomistic materialism, but it also retains a certain religious ambiguity that is itself fecund. Levinasian philosophy is often misunderstood by readers who begin with his most popular books (*Totality and Infinity*, specifically) without tracking the foundation and trajectory of his early works. Levinas's search for "escape" leads him to utilize language from his Jewish background to capture the meaning of his philosophy. Thus, Levinas employs terms like "infinity," "transcendence," and even "metaphysics" throughout his mature works, but these terms must be understood within the broader framework of his philosophy. These terms are, ultimately, religiously ambiguous, in the sense that they can function from a materialist *and* from a religious perspective *at the same time*.

In *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas contrasts "infinity" with "totality" in order to convey the difference between the subjectivity he seeks in contradistinction to traditional philosophy. Plato, for instance, seeks ontology as a means to finding what is most real, and therefore a rational depiction of all Being/beings. The goal of traditional philosophy is to seek rational explanation for all things within a systematic totality. Infinity, on the other hand, constantly exceeds any attempt at totality. Infinity serves as "*a surplus always exterior to the totality*,"[80] a persistent overflowing of totalities that translate difference into the same. Infinity transcends the horizons of the subject's grasp, and therefore offers "escape" from the positive enchainment of the subject's identity. It is the Other, as infinite alterity, who provides the possibility for escape from the suffocating plenitude of Being described in *On Escape*. "Positive enchainment" is nevertheless necessary for the constitution and "separation" of the I, for, as Levinas states, "alterity is possible only starting from *me*."[81] The encounter with the Other occurs in and through the concrete reality of the

[80] Ibid., 22.

[81] Ibid., 40.

subject constituted as subject. Encounter with the Other manifests "a calling into question of the same—which cannot occur within the egoist spontaneity of the same," Levinas names "this calling into question of my spontaneity by the presence of the Other ethics."[82]

Similar to his use of "infinity," Levinas utilizes "metaphysics" in a particular manner that does not directly correlate to the traditional understanding of the term. Levinas argues that traditional philosophies begin with ontology (e.g., Plato's search for ultimate reality), and culminate in totalizing systems which necessarily exclude the infinite Other. Levinas concludes that "Kantism is the basis of philosophy, if philosophy is ontology."[83] With ontology as the basis of philosophy, encounter with the Other begins "in the ego, a free subject, to whom every other would be only a limitation that invites war, domination, precaution and information."[84] This point includes the short-circuit in Marxist ethics, as Marx's atomistic commitments preclude any rational limitation of the subject's freedom. The only solutions to the inevitable disputes between free subjects are war and domination. Opposed to totalizing ontologies, "infinity" suggests an *otherwise than Being*, which is likewise conveyed through the "meta" in *metaphysics.* "Metaphysics" need not signify traditional religious belief in deities or an immaterial soul, but rather "escape" through ethical encounter with the human Other.

In order to articulate "the Other," Levinas relies on religious language. The Other indeed functions similarly to traditional, Judeo-Christian conceptions of God, in the sense of a "higher power" who calls into question the subject's freedom. Levinas makes clear, however, that the Other is first and foremost the *human* Other: "This *way* of the neighbor is a face. The face of a neighbor signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contract. It escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality."[85] The "face" of the neighbor exceeds the philosophical totalities that would seek to determine an ethical or political "pact" or "contract," which seek to

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[82] Ibid., 43.

[83] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 179.

[84] Ibid., 119.

[85] Ibid., 88.

include all humans, but inevitably exclude some others. For this reason, the face of the neighbor must remain *indeterminate*: "The disclosing of a face is nudity, non-form, abandon of self, ageing, dying, more naked than nudity."[86]

Conclusion

The indeterminate nature of the face of the infinite Other thus inscribes an ambiguous space for ethical deliberation that remains open to both materialist and religious communities. From the materialist perspective, "the Other" signifies the primordial atomic encounter that makes possible materiality itself. The primordial encounter grounds subjectivity as "freedom called into question by the Other" in the atomic movements of swerve and repulsion. From a religious perspective, "freedom called into question by the Other" affirms traditional commitments to transcendence (for deity and/or humanity) beyond Being or materiality. This transcendence remains grounded in the human Other, however, and therefore provides a common basis for deliberation.

In the post-2016 U.S. political landscape, "freedom called into question by the Other" provides a route for civic engagement across religious and materialist boundaries. Levinasian ethics provides a crucial solution to the ethical quandary within Marx's atomistic materialism, and this same solution provides a path forward for non-liberal, non-humanist ethics. At the same time, the religious ambiguity of the Other allows for ethical deliberation without rejecting non-materialist commitments.

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[86] Ibid.

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