

THE EMBODIED GOOD LIFE: FROM ARISTOTLE TO LIFE-GROUND ETHICS

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Summary

The chapter examines the development of the understanding of the embodied good life in the western philosophical tradition, focusing on Aristotle, Nietzsche, Marcuse, Adorno, Sen and Nussbaum in light of the contemporary philosophical framework of life-ground ethics originating with McMurtry. Historical conceptions of the ‘embodied good life’ differ as regards their content, but are agreed that the capabilities or potentialities of humans understood as terrestrial beings are the real ground of good lives. The development of this idea through philosophical history reveals a growing rejection of invidious moral hierarchies and a deepening understanding of the social conditions without which good lives are impossible. Ultimately, without healthy social (and natural) life-support systems as its enabling conditions, an embodied good life is impossible.

1. The Embodied Good Life

It is always possible to maintain in theory, with Plato, that the body is but a prison house for the soul and to look forward to the body’s death as a welcome liberation. It is much more difficult to *live* in accordance with that principle. After all, Plato himself did not commit suicide, but devoted himself in exemplary fashion to the development of understanding of the most profound problems of relevance to the conduct of human life, not death. In so far as philosophy concerns itself with life it must contend with the life of the body, for speculate as we may about the soul and immortality, the only life we *know* is the life of finite embodiment. Even Plato, the world’s first systematic idealist did not plan his utopia for immortal souls, but for embodied human beings.

However, it is one thing to be unable to avoid, as a matter of practical necessity, the care of the body, and quite another to conceive of the good life as embodied. Theorizing the embodied good life is as rare in Western philosophy as it is essential to a real philosophical understanding of human nature and its highest possibilities. As in metaphysics so too in ethics, an idealist hope for transcendence and ultimate unity with the divine dominates over the experiential reality of embodied finitude and struggle. But the hope for transcendence, while it may prove motivating for some, can never replace the need for an understanding of the highest to which we may aspire *on earth*. It is in the interests of exploring the question of the highest to which we may aspire on earth that the present re-examination of the key moments of the history of thinking about the embodied good life is offered.

What each of the philosophies of the embodied good life share is a general idea that the way in which human life is socially organized can make it better or worse. As soon as the problem of the good life is posed the question of what life actually requires for its full development cannot be avoided. Of course, the different positions to be examined diverge on specific questions of what the range of life-requirements are, the content of the potentialities they claim are most worthwhile, their beliefs about the relative equality of different people, and the social and political conditions necessary for human flourishing. Each implies, but does not fully ground itself in, a normative conception of life-value as the widest and deepest development, realization, and enjoyment of the capabilities that distinguish human beings. Because the major historical accounts of the embodied good life do not fully understand what McMurry calls the “life-ground of value, (the totality of life’s conditions which forms the basis for the development, realization, and enjoyment of all values that exist), (McMurry, *Unequal Freedoms*, p. 23) each is beset with internal tensions and contradictions. The aims of this chapter are first to reconstruct and explain the major conceptions of the embodied good life in Western philosophy, and second to derive from this history the basic principles of a life-grounded synthesis appropriate for the twenty-first century.

The organization of the chapter will therefore be historical. It will begin with the ancient world’s most important conception of the embodied good life, that of Aristotle. From Aristotle it will next consider the work of Marx. The chapter will pass over the contributions of the ancient atomists and Epicurus not because they do not contain a conception of the embodied good life, but because, in the first case, the extent material is too limited to enable much of any certainty to be said, and, in the second, the conception of the good life is essentially passive. Important as Epicurean philosophy may be to a complete history of conceptions of the embodied good life, it does not advance to any significant degree the main focus of this investigation, which is slow emergence in consciousness of the reality of life-requirements, their instrumental connection to the development of valuable human capabilities, and the ultimate good for embodied humans, the development, realization, and enjoyment of these capabilities in ever wider and deeper scope. From Marx the chapter will shift to the anomalous work of Nietzsche. As will become clear, Nietzsche is anomalous in so far as he affirms a tendentiously one-sided understanding of life-value. From Nietzsche the analysis will shift to the work of Herbert Marcuse. Marcuse comes the closest of all the historical accounts to explicitly grounding his conception of the embodied good life in the life-ground of value. From Marcuse the chapter will move to consider the contributions of

his colleague at the Institute for Social Research, Theodor Adorno. A thinker of acute insight, Adorno nevertheless restricts his conception of the embodied good life to its negative plane—the avoidance of material harm. The historical moment of the work will conclude with an overview of the contributions that Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum’s attempts to construct a “capability approach” to the problem of social justice has made to the development of a contemporary conception of the embodied good life. The chapter will conclude with a framework for a life-grounded understanding of the embodied good life that synthesises the main insights of the historical material into a future-oriented idea of the highest to which terrestrial humanity may aspire.

2. Aristotle: Human Capabilities and Social Hierarchy

Aristotle’s conception of the embodied good life must be understood in the context of his metaphysical understanding of form and matter. Form is understood in general as the principle of active structuring and determination, while matter is its passive and determined complement. In the natural universe, form and matter are always found together in concrete individuals. For living things, form is the soul of the living material body. Living beings are determined in their specific nature through the presence and activity of soul within them. While it is true that soul is the active principle, matter or the body is equally important because, for finite natural things at least, the soul cannot exist in separation from its bodily matter. While Aristotle does note one important exception to this conclusion, it remains the case that so long as he is thinking of human beings in their earthly activity, the good life must be embodied. The exception will be explained in the conclusion of this section. At this point it is essential to examine the relationship between form or soul, body, and the good life for human beings.

For Aristotle it is impossible to understand life in general, and human life in particular, in mechanical terms. Reacting against the atomistic attempt to reduce life to simple atomic motion, Aristotle contends that it is impossible to understand the motions characteristic of life in abstraction from desire. Even the simplest organisms *move themselves* to action in pursuit of the object of desire. Hence there is a difference of kind between vital motion and the externally determined motions of inanimate material. All life seeks to preserve itself and develop its defining capabilities. In other words, life pursues goals in a way impossible for insentient and non-conscious matter. As he says, “the essence of soul is to move itself.” (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, p. 543). In other words, there is a freedom definitive of life that consists in being endowed with the power to pursue goals that are natural to it. Living things act, they do not simply behave in response to external stimuli. If life is, in general, activity, then the good life will be, in general, the best sort of activity in accordance with the defining potentialities of living things. While it follows from Aristotle’s understanding of life that all living things have a natural good, human beings will be the exclusive focus in what follows.

For Aristotle, the differences between species are not simply natural facts, as in modern biology, but signs of a normative hierarchy of value at work in the universe. The more potentialities a living thing shares in, the closer it is to the divine perfection, and therefore the more valuable its life can be. Humans are the most valuable species

because they alone can reason and understand, a potential they share with the divine but with no other terrestrial creatures. “Life seems to be common even to plants, but what we are seeking is peculiar to man. Let us exclude, therefore, nutrition and growth ... [as well as] perception [because] *it* also seems to be common even to ... every animal. There remains, then, an active life of the element that has a rational principle.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, in McKeon, ed, p. 942, 1098a-1-5) The element of the human being that has a rational principle is the intellect, an element unique to the human soul.

Aristotle means by “soul” that which gives life to living things and determines the set of capabilities that defines them as a species and locates them within the cosmic hierarchy. (Aristotle, *On the Soul*, p. 555) Unlike Plato, for whom the soul was in principle separable from the body, for Aristotle soul and body form a unity whose disintegration means death for living things. The soul shapes and organizes the raw material of the body into living matter, capable of self-activity and self-realization. Whatever human beings are distinctively capable of they are capable of because of the organizing activity of the soul. The good for human beings is therefore grounded in the highest potentialities which the human soul encodes.

Although Aristotle argues that the good life for human beings is distinct from the good of plants and animals, he does not follow Plato and claim that there is no value whatsoever in the ‘animal’ requirements and activities of human beings. On the contrary, the hierarchy that Aristotle defends does not reject the value of the capabilities that we share with animals, although he does indeed regard them as lower values. He makes it clear that there are goods specific to the body, arguing that “all men think that the happy life is pleasant ... and reasonably too; for activity is perfect when it is unimpeded, and happiness is a perfect thing; this is why the happy man needs the goods of the body, and external goods ... in order that he may be unimpeded in these ways.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1055). All the capabilities of the human being therefore have value, but are arranged in a hierarchy according to which those that are distinctive of human beings are higher than those that link us to animal life, and that which only some human beings share with the divine (the intellectual comprehension of universal order and truth) is highest of all. Thus the goods of the body are of real value for humans, but they are not (as they are for lower animals) ultimate goods.

Instead, the goods of the body are instrumental goods for Aristotle. Since the soul is integrated with the body, the soul cannot act (it cannot move, sense, or think) if the body is seriously damaged. It is to avoid the impediments life-requirement deprivation causes that rational people must concern themselves with the body’s goods. The ultimate aim of satisfying those goods, however, is to realize one’s specifically human capabilities in the best way possible. Aristotle is neither hedonist nor ascetic, but instead defines happiness as resulting from the highest form of realization of the natural capabilities of human beings. “If happiness is activity in accordance with virtue [i.e., excellence] it is reasonable that it should be in accordance with the highest virtue, and this will be the best thing in us.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1104). Now, the best thing in us, according to Aristotle, is our reason, our capability for conscious understanding of the universal order that structures the cosmos. It is reason that distinguishes human beings from lower animals and unites those humans who can

exercise it fully with the divine. Thus it is reason that frames the essential goals of human life. To the extent that Aristotle connects reason with the essential goals of human life within nature and society, his arguments here contribute significantly to the history of conceptions of the embodied good life. To the extent, however, that he turns reason away from earth and toward the divine, Aristotle's arguments stand in serious tension with his conception of human nature as integrated unity of soul and body.

There is therefore a tension in Aristotle's work between an implicitly life-grounded understanding of conscious capability realization and enjoyment for human beings as such, and an exclusionary and hierarchical understanding of the exercise of contemplative reason as the most human of capabilities, to be realized and enjoyed only by the best sort of people. When Aristotle is focussed on the human being as an integral unity of needs and capabilities, he is open to the possibility of a diversity of good lives. In this dimension Aristotle seems to recognise that individuals are particular embodiments of the total set of human possibilities. Differences in the capabilities each individual is able to realise and enjoy does not *entail* invidious distinctions of moral worth. Instead, they could be interpreted simply as the expression of necessary and valuable differences of interest and talent: "One might think that all men desire pleasure because they all aim at life; life is an activity, and each man is active about those things and with those faculties that he loves most." (*Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 1100) Aristotle does not *ultimately* affirm the equality of all pleasures, but there is nevertheless an implicit recognition that people realise their human capabilities in distinct ways, and that to some extent each of these ways, provided they are not vicious and destructive, have real value.

Judged as a whole, however, Aristotle's conception of the embodied good life ultimately affirms a divine standard of perfection as of ultimate value. The life-grounded road implicit in his recognition of the diversity of expressions of human capabilities is the road *not* taken. His conception of the divine model of goodness recognises only one life as best– the philosophical life of contemplative reason. This life is open only to the best men, not to women and slaves. It is devoted not to the realization of human capabilities in ways that support, encourage, and enable other humans to realise their capabilities, not to social health as the foundation of the freedom of each to realise themselves in unique ways for others, but to the private contemplation of the divine perfection in an effort to make oneself immortal as far as possible. (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, p.879) Indeed, the contemplation of the divine life is directly a contemplation of inequality in the relation between the human and the divine. This inequality, Aristotle believes, is and ought to be replicated in the social and political relations between the best *men* and their inferiors (the young, women, and slaves). "The male is superior by nature, and the female inferior, and the one rules, and the one is ruled; this principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind. Where there is such a difference as that between ... men and animals (as in the case of those whose business is to use their body, and can do nothing better), the lower sort are by nature slaves, and it is better for them that they should be under the rule of a master." (Aristotle, *Politics*, p. 1132) Once human potentialities are judged from the divine standard, a hierarchy of potentials appears within human life, and it turns out that most human beings are not capable of a life of rational activity, and therefore *their* good consists only in being ruled. From being a means towards a valuable and meaningful life for all Aristotle's

account of the embodied good life ends up a justification for a subservient, impoverished, indeed, subhuman life for most. (See also Chapter Philosophy and World Problems).

Notwithstanding the unrecognised conflict evident between Aristotle's life-grounded conception of the embodied good life and his earth-transcending model of the ideal good life, his work is the first to systematically argue for an essential link between the possibilities of the human organism and goodness. His limitations owe more to the slave-based social order in which his thought developed and which he regarded as normative, than to abstract failures of ethical reasoning. The implications of Aristotle's understanding of the relationship between life-requirements and capability realization and the grounding of life-value in free development and enjoyment of vital capabilities exceed his vision which, like every finite human being, could not fully escape the gravitational pull of his own time, place, and class position. The truly philosophical appropriation of his work is to follow out the implications beyond the relative narrowness of his self-interpretation. Thus, having noted and explained the unrecognised conflict in his conception of the good life, the chapter can now shift to the more explicitly developed (but still not comprehensive or consistent) life-grounded understanding of the embodied good life in Marx.

3. Marx: The Socio-economic Grounds of Embodied Freedom

The philosophical affinities between Marx and Aristotle have often been noted. (See for example Scott Meikle, *Essentialism in the Works of Karl Marx*; Martha Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice*). Whatever historical interest these connections serve, they will not be explored here save in so far as they are directly relevant to the chapter's philosophical continuity. Nor will Marx's political project occupy centre stage, but will be examined only in so far as it illustrates important conceptual limitations in Marx's understanding of the life-ground of value that underlies his understanding of the embodied good life. That conceptual limitation, which it will serve purposes of clarity to specify at the outset, concerns the fact that Marx is not an ethical philosopher concerned with individual goodness, but a social philosopher primarily focussed on the behaviour and interests of classes, and in bringing about the revolutionary transformation of capitalist society. For Marx the question of the good for individuals is a problem that can properly be posed *after* a socialist revolution. As he says in the *Communist Manifesto*, "the proletarians cannot become masters of the productive forces of society, except by abolishing their own previous mode of appropriation." (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p. 44). Moreover, it is not by ethical argument and critique that this, their historical mission is to be accomplished, but rather by the working out to their full development the dynamics of capitalist society. "The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own gravediggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable." (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p.45)

Obviously subsequent historical developments have not borne Marx's prediction out. The problem for this chapter is not historical, however, but, as noted above, conceptual. If it is the case that the collapse and overthrow of capitalism is nothing more than the

working out of the laws of capitalism itself, then there is no ethical problem involved, either in the life of workers under capitalism, nor in the different structures and institutions of socialist society. Yet, Marx attains his greatest power of insight not when he is *describing* how capitalism works, but when he is *condemning* its life-destructive effects on working class *individuals*. In order to understand Marx's significance for the historical development of the idea of the embodied good life, it is necessary focus on the critical rather than the "scientific" Marx, but without forgetting this core element of his overall theory and the tensions that it introduces into his critique of capitalism.

There is no doubt that Marx, when writing *Capital*, regarded himself on analogy with a natural scientist. As he himself describes his approach, "here individuals are dealt with only in so far as they are personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class relations and class interests," and the development of these relations and interests within capitalism as a "process of natural history."(Marx, *Capital, Volume One*, p. 21). Yet there is another Marx, a philosophical, life-grounded thinker whose conception of individual self-realization never disappears from his work, but exists side by side and in tension with the natural scientist. This Marx views society not as a deterministic process of "iron laws" working themselves out, but as fluid and contradictory processes of human interaction with the natural world whose basic goal is material life-reproduction and development. Because human beings transform both the natural and social worlds through their basic life-activity they alter the world as it immediately presents itself, and is therefore free. For the Marx who concerns himself with human activity, history is a universal process of self-creation: "the object of labour is ... the objectification of man's species life: for he duplicates himself not only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore sees himself in a world he has created."(Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p. 276).

This human world, moreover, is not simply an instrumental system for satisfying needs, it is itself productive of new and human needs. These truly human needs, above all for "free conscious activity," are anchored in human nature behind its historically produced forms. "Man ... treats himself as a ... universal and therefore a free being ... Life-activity, productive life itself... is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life ... free, conscious activity is man's species character." (Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, pp. 275-276.). The 'truly human' for Marx is therefore found in that which, though anchored in our body, is not immediately given, but which must be created through human consciousness and action itself realizing its projects. The problem, however, is that all previous historical forms have impeded, rather than enabled, the free self-creation of human beings through self-determined projects. Under capitalism, the social impediment to free self-realization takes the form of what Marx calls alienated labour. As alienated, labour is reduced to the status of a commodity and its essential connection with the embodied good life broken. Labour becomes a mere means to life under the coercive control of the capitalist class, as opposed to what Marx takes it to be essentially– the concrete expression of the free nature of human beings.

What makes Marx above all a *social* philosopher is that for him ancient conceptual problems, and especially the problem of freedom, are treated as problems of social organization. Metaphysical antitheses like free will and determinism hold no interest

for Marx. Instead the problem of freedom is essentially understood as a problem of the social organization of labour. Viewed from the perspective of labour, the nature of social contradictions takes on a different form from their appearance in Marx's scientific work. Where Marx is *analysing* capitalism the basic contradiction is understood as holding between the forces of production and the relations of production. Periods of social crisis occur where the organization of labour (the relations of production) become "fetters" on social productivity (the forces of production). "At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces ... come into conflict with the existing relations of production ... Then begins an era of social revolution."(Marx, *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, p. 21.) As is evident, Marx here does nothing more than *describe* what he regards as the objective grounds of possibility of social revolution. There is nothing in this formulation that would explain what would make the new society superior to the old, save greater productivity. Greater productivity alone, however, simply considered as greater production of whatever society produces, has no necessary connection to life-grounded values, and can indeed prove destructive of them, as the contemporary crisis of environmental health shows. It is only if social contradictions are understood from the standpoint of the *quality of life-activity* rather than the *quantity of commodities produced* that the ethical significance of Marx's work appears. This dimension of the problem Marx does not recognise and a moral issue he blinkers out.

Put in the simplest terms, the ethical problem of capitalism for Marx is that it inverts the proper relationship between human life-value and economic value. In other words, human life-value– the realized capabilities of human senses, limbs, and minds– is treated as nothing but an instrument of the production and growth of money-capital. More specifically, the instrumentalisation of human life-activity by capital (or "dead labour" as he calls it) takes the form of alienated labour. By "alienation" Marx means a social process through which the essential power of human being– to create and contemplate themselves in a world they have created– confront humans as objective social forces that rule over and degrade their life-activity. Thus, alienation takes five forms: alienation from the product of labour, from the process of labour, from humanity's species-being or essential nature, from the natural environment, and from other humans. Of these five types, the first is the most basic in that it creates the social conditions required for the operation of the other four.

By 'alienation from the product of labour' Marx means the control of all productive wealth– the conditions of work, its raw materials, the labour of the people who do the work, and the commodities it creates, by the capitalist class. As a consequence, workers are entirely dependent on their wages, and their wages are determined not by the real life-requirements of workers, but by the level of market demand for workers. As a consequence of this basic form of dependence, workers are also alienated from the process of their labour, or, what is the same thing for Marx, their fundamental life-activity. Work is not free under capitalism, but compelled under threat of poverty or worse. Furthermore, since labour is compelled from labourers and conforms to the demands of labour markets and factory organization, workers are also alienated from their essential human nature. Their actual work activity does not express the underlying human capability for "free, conscious activity," but is at best a means to mere physical life maintenance. This instrumental relationship between labour and physical life

maintenance also expresses human alienation from the natural world. Although nature is, viewed from the standpoint of human organic life-requirements, the basis of all need-satisfaction and life-support, under capitalism it is mere raw material for the production of money capital. Hence people starve even in the midst of tremendous social and natural wealth. Finally, since capitalism is a competitive system that purchases labour only when it can be profitably employed, workers are set at odds with each other. Rather than creating the human world freely in cooperation with each other, everyone must compete for individual survival.

The consequences for human life are two-fold. On the one hand, from the standpoint of basic need satisfaction, life becomes dependent on finding paid-labour at a wage that can support at least subsistence consumption. Basic freedom of life-action is subordinated to the ruling class demand for surplus value. Wages will not be paid to all who need wages just because all have a life-need for wages if they are to survive. Wages will only be paid according to the system-needs of labour markets, i.e., only when there is a system demand for workers and at the lowest price possible in the competitive market system. “Capital has one single life-impulse,” says Marx, “the tendency to create value and surplus value ... [it] is dead labour that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and it lives the more, the more labour it sucks.” (Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., p. 224) From the standpoint of human self-realization capitalism also has catastrophic effects. The fundamental forms of human creative activity lose their human, i.e., free and conscious character. Human labour becomes part of a monstrous automaton– the capitalist economy– in which its every movement and moment is determined. “In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage.” (Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1 p.398). What Marx regards as the wealth of human needs for the free development of the whole complex array of human capabilities is reduced to serving the private profit imperative to accumulate money capital.

Again, however, Marx always remains a thinker of the concrete. It is this attempt to think the concrete social situation and avoid abstract moralism that in part explains the unresolved tension in his work. Instead of a straightforward condemnation of the inhuman consequences of capitalist social organization, Marx vacillates between obvious ethical critique and explanation of the dynamics of capitalist class structure of rule. If one focusses only on his descriptions of capitalist social functioning, it is often difficult to understand what exactly the ethical problem of capitalism is. When one translates his all-important concept of the means of production into life-grounded terms, however, the deeper value served by Marx’s critique becomes clear. Means of production are not simply facts about a social system; as the universal resources of life-maintenance and development they are essential life-values divorced from the life-ground of people and ecosystems by private ownership and control.

The class that controls what everyone needs to survive and develop is necessarily the class that controls all the other institutions of society– the good life is reduced to a falsely universalised idea of this particular class’ private interests. Since people by their daily struggles prove that they desire life, they find themselves with little choice but to conform to the social conditions that alone sustain their being. Thus Marx implies, although he never fully spells the point out, that the appearance of legitimacy of

capitalist society is grounded in people's acceptance of imposed conformity because they lack any material alternatives for life-maintenance.

The secret to Marx's social philosophy and critique of capitalism is that he peels away this apparent legitimacy, the purported equality of citizens of capitalist society, to reveal the structure of coercion and the ruling class interests compelling people to behave as they do. Understood as a system of coercive domination, capitalism rests upon moral inversions of value: capital, the result of human activity, appears as the basis and cause of human activity; the non-living system's imperative to expand the extraction of surplus-value appears as a law of nature ruling over human life; the circuits of commodity markets take on a life of their own to which human desires and needs must conform, and the cooperative basis of individual life is turned into a ruthless struggle of all against all competition for work and money. These inversions, Marx famously contended, could only be overcome through the revolution of the working class against alienation and exploitation.

This chapter is not the place for a close examination of Marx's most contested political arguments concerning proletarian revolution. What is relevant here is the more general claim that he is making, namely, that the embodied good life for human beings cannot be the result of a good will triumphing over bad circumstances. While in his later works Marx does not reiterate this point, it is clear from his understanding of alienated labour that his philosophical understanding of human activity implies that goodness is a function of life-activity. Life-activity, however, is always socially organized. The degree to which lives are good or bad, then, depends upon how social life is organized. For Marx the embodied good life cannot be achieved until the exploitative and alienated conditions of existence essential to capitalism are overcome. Only then can society be re-organized on the principle that the goal of social labour is need satisfaction and the end of need satisfaction the free development of human capabilities. "In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labour ... has vanished, ... only then can the narrow horizons of bourgeois right be crossed ... and society inscribe on its banners "From each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs." (Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, p. 119)

As is clear, Marx does not ultimately think that individual human beings are mere passive functions of circumstances (a claim of earlier materialists that Marx explicitly rejects in the *Theses on Feuerbach*). "Society" is not the mechanical cause of individual activity; it is the organized form of individual activity that determines the range of what is materially possible in given circumstances. Because human beings are conscious beings, however, they are capable, once they have awoken to the life-impooverished nature of capitalist limitations on human activity, of changing those limitations by changing social institutions that are structured to enforce and legitimate ruling class interests.

Since human beings are embodied they are finite and will always face some limitations on their life-activity. Embodied beings must do one thing rather than another. Unlike Aristotle's divine perfection, real human beings cannot fully actualize their essence. We live for a limited period of time and must make choices between the different possibilities for capability realization. The good life for an embodied being, then, is not

to be conceived on a model of divine perfection, but on a human model, not of an ideal life, but of a society that removes unnecessary limitations on the range of actions it is possible for its members to pursue and enjoy. For Marx, achieving this goal required freeing the forces of production from the fetters that capitalist society imposed upon them, or, in other words, to fully realize the wealth producing potential of capitalist society itself. The purpose of wealth production, as the quotation for the *Critique of the Gotha Program* makes clear, would, however, be fundamentally different in a communist society: human need-satisfaction and capability realization, not private money appropriation. Marx thus argues that human freedom depends on overthrowing the capitalist system by a worker-led revolution. In the new world the means of wealth production would be collectively controlled and employed so as to satisfy human needs and, in so doing, satisfy the material conditions of life-activity. Then, and only then, for Marx, would the content that gives filling and meaning to life be a free creation of individuals themselves. “In the place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonism, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all.” (Marx and Engels, *Communist Manifesto*, p. 54).

Thus Marx proceeds from an understanding of embodied human freedom that shares with Aristotle the principle that what distinguishes human action from mere behaviour is its conscious, intentional, and meaningful character. “What distinguishes the worst of architects from the nests of bees,” Marx says, “is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before erecting it in reality.”(Marx, *Capital, Volume 1*, p. 174.) Marx surpasses Aristotle, however, in so far as his conception is freed of the invidious normative hierarchies that structure Aristotle’s metaphysics and social philosophy. Moreover, Marx uncovers the general key to the solution of the fundamental normative problem that embodied beings face, although he did not regard it as a normative but as a historical problem: how to be free in a world which necessarily limits the range of activities it is possible for any person to realise and enjoy? The answer is not to treat the problem of freedom as a metaphysical problem of free will but as a social problem of production, control, and use of society’s wealth.

However, as everyone in the twenty-first century knows, Marx’s vision for a communist future was never realized. Beyond the historical failure of working class movements and Marxist parties to achieve a free and democratic socialism, there are basic philosophical limitations in Marx’s conception of the embodied good life that deserve consideration. First, Marx conceives social progress as the progress of the productive forces of richer human needs, without supplying a criterion by which productive force development may be ensured to select for life-enabling rather than life-reducing technological formations. This problem becomes all the more acute in wealthy capitalist countries in which the working class has come to depend upon and demand productive forces for products that are energy-wasting and life-debilitating. Otherwise put, Marx argues that the material condition of the real liberation of humanity is the full global development of the productive forces of capitalism without supplying any criterion beyond sheer physical growth of industry by which one can distinguish life-serving economic development from life-destructive growth and consumption.

This is a problem that the post-1845 Marx does not address, and poses a fundamental

moral issue of productivism versus quality of life that is blinkered out. Clearly Marx suffers here, (as Aristotle did too), from the limitations that his context imposed upon him. Faced with the unremitting poverty of the working class as his example, it is completely understandable why he would valorise the growth of the forces of production in the way that he did. Today, however, global life-support systems face the opposite problem– not too little growth and development, but too much life-blind production.

Marx also failed to appreciate the depth to which invidious ideologies of inferiority like racism and sexism are able to sink into human consciousness and blind it to its common life-interests. This problem is not simply political– that is, it is not that Marx simply failed to appreciate the depth of divisions affecting the socialist movement– but, more importantly, that he undervalued the affective and interpersonal dimensions of embodied freedom. He does not ignore these dimensions, but his understanding of freedom is rooted in his conception of productive work as such. He thus did not fully appreciate the value that respect, friendship and caring interaction between equals, dignity, and freedom as ends in themselves must play in a good embodied life. These problems have an underlying source. While the life-ground of value is clearly implied in Marx’s conception of free human activity, Marx ultimately leaves the life-ground behind for the development of the productive forces as such, and confines issues of value to his labour theory of the value of products.(For systematic explanation of these short comings in Marx, see Chapter “What is Good? What is Bad?”) The next thinker to be considered, Friedrich Nietzsche, does consciously ground his ethics in life. As we will see, its brilliant boldness notwithstanding, Nietzsche’s conception of life-value is one-sided and ultimately life-destructive in its implications.

4. Friedrich Nietzsche: Life as Predation

Nietzsche, in contrast to Marx, makes the problem of realizing the embodied good life a matter of self, rather than political, overcoming. Whereas for Marx the class structure and social dynamics of capitalism constituted the primary impediment to self-realization, for Nietzsche all established moral and social limits are but forms of instinctual repression imposed on individuals. Social changes without corresponding changes in individual beliefs and practices would only serve to reconstitute the same forms of problematic self-denial in a different social context. Despite this fundamentally distinct understanding of the impediments to realizing the embodied good life there are significant parallels between Marx and Nietzsche which should be noted before proceeding into a more detailed examination of Nietzsche proper.

First, albeit for profoundly different reasons, both are epochal critics of the nineteenth century bourgeois world. Both aim their criticisms in opposite ways at the systematic repression of human life-capacity realization. Second, both expose the deluding functions of religion and ‘bourgeois’ morality, while differing again on the nature of their functions. Nietzsche’s critique assigns a foundational role to religion and morality, while Marx sees both as second-order justifications for a repressive structure that is socio-economic in origin. Third, both consciously ground their conception of the good life in definite conceptions of the organic human being as the origin of the creative capabilities that distinguish human beings from other forms of life. Of course, the

content of Nietzsche's conception of the embodied good life differs from that of Marx. Nevertheless, this formal convergence is important, not simply as an abstract connection between otherwise different thinkers, but more importantly as a sign of a growing recognition in post-Hegelian European philosophy of the centrality of organic, material being to any adequate, demythologised understanding of the human life condition.

Indeed, it is Nietzsche's boldness in asserting the bodily foundations of morality that makes his work unique. From his perspective the repressive systems of morality and religion have their origin in a fear of the powerful instincts of self-assertion that drive all life forms, but in particular human beings, towards aggression and conquest. Nietzsche's idea of the 'slave morality' in *The Genealogy of Morals* and *Beyond Good and Evil* centres on this repressive function. In his view most systems of morality and religion were created by the physically and intellectually weaker members of given social orders as protection against the predatory drives of the stronger. By internalizing these teachings the strong are made to feel guilty for their superior vitality. These guilt feelings are turned against that vitality and to the detriment not only of the strong person, but also to the species, which is consequently deprived of the unique experiments in living the more instinctually powerful would otherwise create.

In Nietzsche's terms, slave morality and religion are life-denying. By 'life-denying' Nietzsche means not that they promote physical death over life. Rather he means that slave morality and the teachings of other-world religions are essentially dishonest about what life is. Christianity serves as a paradigm case. Judged on its own terms, Christianity is an ethics of life. Its primary teachings are designed to ensure to the believer eternal life. Eternal life, however, in Nietzsche's terms, is a fraud. It is a fraud not because there is no heaven (although of course Nietzsche does not believe in heaven), but because eternal life as eternal peace and repose *is not life*. Life for Nietzsche *is* aggression, self-assertion, struggle, conflict, and change. The Christian conception of eternal life (or the Platonic, from which medieval Christianity borrowed) is thus a fundamental distortion of what Nietzsche takes to be life's true nature. That truth is unbearable to the weak, Nietzsche believes, precisely because, properly understood, life means their conquest by the more alive.

Just because these systems of thought cannot value life in its own terms (to do so would invite their own destruction), they must disparage embodied life in the name of a fictitious and guilt-inducing higher life. This higher life is the life of the soul, in contrast to the only real life people know, the life of the body. In place of actual joy at the creative expression of the body's instincts and drives other-world religion and slave morality posit a static *after-life* in which all that has been lost will be restored and nothing new ever really happens. Thus, a direct consequence of internalizing the tenets of religion and slave morality is a constitutional incapacity to value life and experience happiness in the living of it. Hence the life-denying implications of these systems of thought. The consequence is successive social systems of mediocre human beings incapable of enjoyment because they are made miserable by their embodied instincts and drives.

Since slave morality and other world religion and the instincts they attack are not historically specific social systems of thinking, the guilt effects their internalization

causes do not admit of collective, political solutions, as Marx believed. Enlightenment philosophy, natural science, democracy, and socialism are equally compromised by their conception of an ultimate, redeeming truth (of reason, of the laws of nature, of the people, of equality). They are in their own ways, Nietzsche claims, as enervating as the ‘superstitions’ from which they claim to emancipate humanity. While these systems of thought do not despise the body in the same way as past slave moralities and other world religion, they could be argued to be trying equally to escape from the other essential reality of embodied life: its impermanence, uncertainty, and will to power as its nature. These systems attempt to suppress this uncertainty and impermanence through the ‘Will to Truth’ whose aim is to anchor and redeem the mutable in some unchanging foundation in place of the Will to Power. Linking the priest and the physicist is the equipollent desire to ground change in a higher unchanging law free of conflict; to escape from life’s contingency through mastery of its principles. This other dimension of life denial is powerfully expressed in *The Joyful Wisdom* where Nietzsche derides the “longing for certainty ... the longing by all means to get at something stable ... in short, the instinct of weakness.”(Clive, *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, p. 395) Since there is no political solution for life-denial, Nietzsche’s criticisms are always tinged with melancholy. The characters that expose it, the fool who announces the death of god in *The Joyful Wisdom* and Zarathustra himself are always pained by the knowledge that they have come “too soon” for their message to be understood.

What is that message? In the simplest terms it is a call to overcome the forms of self-denial that Nietzsche argues religion, science, and metaphysics all demand. In more sophisticated terms, Nietzsche’s argument amounts to a “transvaluation of values,” or an inversion whereby that which has been repressed by fear-driven thought-systems comes to dominate over them. He argues in *Beyond Good and Evil* that the transvaluation of values is grounded in natural-historical account of value. It is natural, in so far as his conception of joy or happiness is rooted in what he takes to be the basic instinctual structure of life. It is historical in so far as the suppression of these values is not itself natural (as, for example, Freud would argue a few decades later), but constituted by definite political and social interests warring against the ‘noble’ instincts of mastery and self-expression. In order to fully understand this claim it is necessary to examine closely perhaps Nietzsche’s most famous idea, the “Will to Power.”

To begin to understand this idea it is best to quote him at length. In *Beyond Good and Evil* he writes: “here we must think profoundly to the very basis and avoid all sentimentality: life is essentially appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and ... exploitation.” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 226). Thus the will to power simply *is* life, understood on its manifest terms without “sentimentality and weakness,” i.e., outside the distorting frames of slave moralities and their supporting philosophies. It is impossible not to see here the essential link between life and predation. The values in terms of which Nietzsche defines the Will to Power are precisely the virtues of the predator— strength, self-imposition, incorporation, self-expression as the consequence of the subordination of the other life form to the predatory self. The most creative, and therefore the most joyful life, is precisely the life that does not shirk from the harsh task of treating other life as a mere means to its own development. It is once again best to quote him explicitly in support of these claims. He thus continues in the same text to

maintain that life endeavours to “grow, to gain ground, attract to itself and acquire ascendancy— not because of any morality or immorality, but because it lives, and because Life is precisely Will to Power.” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 227) In this view the exploitation of weaker life by stronger life is neither a socio-economic problem (Marx) nor a moral crime (slave moralities of all sorts); it is nothing more or less than a natural fact about life. It is “beyond good and evil.” He thus concludes that “exploitation does not belong to a depraved, or imperfect, or primitive society, it belongs to the *nature* of the living being as a primary organic function; it is a consequence of the intrinsic Will to Power, which is precisely the Will to Life.” (Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, p. 226).

At the same time, and notwithstanding Nietzsche’s criticisms of the mediocrity of his European contemporaries, it is impossible not to read these arguments as attempts to naturalise, and therefore remove from criticism, the predatory behaviour typical of capitalist society, especially in the imperialist phase that it had already well-embarked upon at the time that Nietzsche was writing (the mid to late nineteenth century). Is there any better description of the behaviour of European imperialists than “appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and ... exploitation?” Is that not *exactly* how they behaved in relation to the indigenous peoples of Africa, North and South America, and Asia? The model of life as predation is the model of the behaviour of the European ruling class towards the non-European people whom they regarded as, at best, objects of exploitations, and at worst, obstacles to be killed.

To be sure, Nietzsche’s primary philosophical goals are not to consciously justify European colonialism. Nor does he intend his conception of the embodied good life to become the principle of any social order so much as a repudiation of it. It cannot become the principle of any social order precisely because any social order requires that its preferred modes of subordination be accepted by the subordinate as legitimate in the name of a higher moral value. Nietzsche, however, wants above all to smash all the traditional idols such that humans face the real terms of their lives honestly. If that were to occur, all religiously or morally or politically legitimate subordination would end, and with it the very possibility of society as it has hitherto been understood. Hence his message is not a call to political revolution but rather the “transvaluation” of values. Those who can understand the message are thus (implicitly) enjoined to begin to live differently, for the sake of making their own lives intense and self-created, regardless of the social circumstances in which they find themselves. As opposed to accepting the externally imposed constraints of a life lived according to a version of slave morality, the ‘higher’ man will impose constraints upon himself. In other words, the person who can live beyond good and evil will invent their own values and live according to them as the conscious expression of Will to Power. For just this reason— that all creation is self-creation and self-creation demands self-constraint and self-direction, Nietzsche’s arguments cannot be universalized as political or moral rules for living. His understanding of life-value may thus perfectly describe the social behaviour of the European ruling class, but this description is not consciously intended. For Nietzsche is entirely innocent of any model of social organization. He expresses the power relations of his epoch without mediation— the *zeitgeist* without moral conscience.

For Nietzsche, values are ultimately grounded in an embrace or rejection of the nature of life as inherently desire for power— with subordination of other life to the goals of the stronger as self-creation. Life is defined in terms of Will to Power and Will to Power is defined in terms of the subordination of the not-self to the self. In other words, life depends, according to Nietzsche, on the successful subordination of other life to the goals of the stronger, not, however, as a class conscious group, but as self-willed, self-creative individuals. Hence the embodied good life may be understood, in general terms, as the joy of expression that the stronger life form feels in the free externalization of its instinctual drive towards conquest and the increased range of vital self-expression that conquest enables. It is just because the embodied good life demands conquest that it must always appear as dangerous to established social forms, even when those established social forms are themselves exploitative or oppressive to some groups. The difference is, as was noted above, that social forms always legitimate oppression and exploitation in the name of some redeeming value. Nietzsche's 'natural historical' account of value offers no redemption for the weak or the strong. His 'transvaluation of values' is not the inauguration of a new universal value system, but rather the release of individual life to rule and create from social forms of constraint.

There can be no doubting the boldness and originality of Nietzsche's conception of the embodied good life. Nor can it be denied that when life is considered outside of established normative frameworks it does indeed appear, in one dimension, as, essentially, predation. If there is an objection to be made against Nietzsche's conception of the good life it is that he too falsely universalizes one dimension of life activity, perhaps as a consequence of his own unconscious internalization of the ruling system of value of nineteenth century imperialism. Even if one does not accept that explanation, there remains the simple biological fact that predators are born as helpless as their prey. Without cooperative interdependence no predator would live long enough to 'subordinate the strange and weak.' Hence to equate life-value as such with the virtues of the predator is essentially to reduce the complex whole of life-value to one of its dimensions (and not the most basic dimension at that). The world's most successful predator, the human being, is, in its infancy, so powerless that it requires its parents to protect it even from house pets. When life-value is considered in the full complexity that the nature of life itself demands, it becomes apparent that life's most fundamental characteristic is interdependence and mutual support systems. The great self-creative genius that Nietzsche celebrates does not create the food that he eats, the clothes that he wears, the language that he speaks. All acts of self-creation presuppose the contributions of other people, and their full value, it will become clear below, also requires that these acts make a positive contribution to others with whom life is shared. The conception of the embodied good life that Nietzsche develops is impoverished precisely because of the one-dimensional understanding of the nature of life itself upon which it is grounded. Since the existence of any life-form requires cooperative interaction with other life no conception of *life-value* that excludes it can be adequate or sound. To assert the importance of the interdependent nature of life is not to affirm, in contrast to Nietzsche, the superior value of altruism. On the contrary, as Marx revealed, the essential life-value is neither egoism nor altruism but self-development and self-realization within an interdependent and cooperative environment. This point is central to the conception of the embodied good life developed by Herbert Marcuse, to which the analysis now turns.

5. Herbert Marcuse: The Embodied Foundation of Morality

Marcuse shares with the Nietzsche the belief in a need for a transvaluation of values, but he rethinks the content of the values to be transformed in the context of the forms of coercion and domination he takes to be typical of advanced technological capitalism. However, since the focus of this investigation is the development of the conception of the embodied good life, the content of Marcuse's critique of advanced capitalism will be discussed only in so far as it bears upon his understanding of human needs, capabilities, and the social conditions of their free realization.

Marcuse's conception of the embodied good life draws on widely dispersed philosophical sources. He takes from Aristotle the idea of the realization of human potentialities as the essence of the good life. He historicizes this conception by drawing on the insights of Hegel's understanding of human development, especially as this is articulated in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as the progressive dialectical development of the idea of human freedom. He takes from Marx's materialist critique of Hegel the ideas of alienation and class oppression as well as the principle that the realization of the idea of human freedom must be embodied in a self-determining society in which human need satisfaction takes precedence over money-capital creation. He takes from Nietzsche the idea that effective social and political transformation requires transformed selves guided by ideals of beauty, rather than utility. From Freud, finally, he adopts elements of the theory of the life and death instincts that provide the psychological basis for his hope of a radical libidinal transformation. These influences are broad and deep and it is not possible to adequately discuss each in its own right. Hence this reconstruction of Marcuse's conception of the embodied good life will be thematic and not historical. It will focus upon what Marcuse came to call the 'biological' grounds for an emancipated society in which the embodied good life could be realized.

By 'biological,' Marcuse does not refer to the abstract physical-organic structure of the human body studied by the natural sciences. He is neither a mechanical-reductionist nor an evolutionary psychologist. As he explains in *An Essay on Liberation*, he uses 'biological' to refer to the social organization of the primary drives, instincts, and goals of the human being. Marcuse thus focuses upon the continual production of what he calls a 'second' (socio-cultural) nature out of the naturally determined drives, instincts, and goals that define human life. His hope is that social criticism can reactivate humanity's vital needs for erogenous fulfilment in a politically progressive way. The manipulated dependency on the "false needs" engendered in the subjects of commodity capitalism would be overcome in a free world. In order to understand this emancipatory project more substantively, it is necessary to begin with Marcuse's philosophical interpretation of Freud in *Eros and Civilization*.

The basic question that Marcuse poses in this work might be stated as follows: if the development of scientific forces of production has created sufficient wealth to release people from the forms of repression that Freud believed necessary for the maintenance of civilization, why do people persist in repressive social relationships and accept substitute satisfactions for the more basic and potentially rich sorts of experience their essential nature makes possible? In simpler terms, Marcuse wondered why people did not demand the liberation of the free time scientific production makes potentially

available to them as the foundation for self-determined, self-creative, and mutually enriching forms of action and experience? Why, Marcuse wondered did people who were in a position to recognize the superficiality and ultimately unsatisfying character of life in consumer capitalism did not rebel against it?

Marcuse's answer to these questions is complex and evolves over nearly three decades of work. The first point that must be understood is his reconstruction of Freud's basic idea of repression. According to Freud, the basic demand of the infant human ego is for immediate gratification of its basic desires. Ego-development is understood as the gradual subordination of the 'pleasure-principle' to the 'reality-principle.' The latter teaches that gratification must be delayed if the hard work of producing the means of subsistence is to be accomplished. The reality principle must win out over the pleasure principle if civilization is to develop. The price that individuals pay for civilization is, however, according to Freud, a permanent dissatisfaction with the experience of life.

Marcuse accepts this general picture of the psychological bases of civilization, but goes on to argue that Freud failed to develop his own insights into the historical and social relations in which repression develops. According to Marcuse, what Freud failed to see is that social, and especially technological development, by creating greater material wealth, lessens the demands of the struggle for existence. Therefore, the actual 'quantity' of repression necessary for the maintenance of civilization diminishes as the wealth-producing power of society grows. The less work socially necessary to produce basic need satisfiers, the less 'necessary' repression the ego must suffer. However, the reduction in the quantity of necessary repression does not immediately translate into the use of material wealth to free time and energy for life-promoting, erogenous gratification and creation. The real enemy of freedom and happiness is not repression as such, as Freud maintained, but socially determined 'surplus repression.' Surplus repression is "the restriction necessitated by social domination." (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 35). Surplus repression does not act against the potentially destructive aggressive and violent human instincts, but channels them against a demonized other, as in fascism. Thus, surplus repression acts against the erotic and potentially liberatory demands for rest, free time, beauty, and mutually gratifying forms of human relationship.

The tasks of surplus repression are accomplished by socialising people to define themselves according to what Marcuse calls the 'performance principle.' The performance principle is the socially determined form of the reality principle. (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 35). The reality principle was Freud's term for the psychological force exerted against the ego by the material demands of life. The performance principle, by contrast, is not exerted by the demands of organic life as such, but the socially relative demands of given forms of social domination. Its internalization causes the ego to identify with the forms of need satisfaction and desire gratification that are required if the social formation in which a person lives is to reproduce itself. Under the rule of the performance principle, the good life is identified exclusively with the satisfaction of the desires that people are programmed to feel within this larger mechanism. When people thus identify their happiness only with what society requires them to demand they feel happy and affirmed, even though, according to Marcuse, their deepest vital needs are not met. The possibility that there could be

more vital, pleasurable, beautiful, richer forms of experience and activity never occurs to people dominated by the performance principle of capitalism.

Marcuse's most famous idea, that of 'one-dimensional society' is thus already developed in embryo in his socio-historical account of repression developed more than a decade earlier. In *One-Dimensional Man* he recasts these arguments in terms of what he calls 'true' and 'false' human needs. By 'true' needs Marcuse refers to the requirements of human life in general– the basic physical inputs needed to maintain life as well as the social resources and institutional opportunities (including free time) necessary for the free development of the imaginative and creative capabilities that distinguish humans from other life forms. "False" needs, by contrast, are the needs instilled in people by their society which contribute, not to the free development of *human* potentialities, but rather to the satisfaction of essentially repressive desires to want and work only for what the repressive order offers. (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, pp. 4-5) False needs ought then really to be understood as system needs, in contrast to the repressed human needs whose satisfaction alone can secure a free and good life. However, the problem, considered from the political perspective, is that people are pervasively conditioned to seek satisfaction of these system needs, thereby binding themselves to the repressive order at the level of their very appetitive drives. The tremendous productive power of advanced capitalism is able, moreover, to not only satisfy, but engender ever new demands, creating in effect a cycle of dependence between the system and the class that Marx thought would be its "gravediggers. The immiseration and revolution that Marx thought would necessarily develop has in this way not come to pass. As Marcuse concluded, there seems no longer to be either objective or subjective basis for revolution. People are raised from infancy to equate happiness with the consumption of the commodities that advanced capitalism must sell in order to reproduce itself.

Hence 'one-dimensionality' refers to the situation in which every human value – equality, freedom, goodness, enjoyment– is reduced to its meaning in the given social system, undermining thereby the possibility of criticism on the basis of those values. It is easy, by contrast to criticise a slave-holding society on the basis of the idea of the freedom it obviously denies to the slaves. But where freedom is understood exclusively in terms of the freedom to sell and buy, and people are really free to do so, there is no longer apparently any clear basis from which to argue that people are not free. Making sense of such a claim requires access to the unrealized potentialities of these universal ideas (preserved, so Marcuse always believed, in the history of speculative philosophy from Plato to Hegel). (Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," pp. 43-87). It is in the essential content of these universal ideas, driving as they do beyond every empirical limitation of existing human societies, that our true needs lie. However, because people are socialized to accept as real only what the system provides, and philosophy itself has been reprogrammed as paid ideological service to the ruling order, such arguments do not make sense, *precisely to the people who, because they are actually dominated and programmed, most need to understand them.*

One-dimensionality thus poses a profound problem for Marcuse precisely because the domination of false needs over true needs impedes the realization of the embodied good life. While he always looked to the traditions of speculative philosophy as the source of the values in whose name he criticised existing reality, he nevertheless remained

committed to a this-worldly, terrestrial freedom for human beings. The ‘first’ nature of human beings contains possibilities for a human freedom as the creation of the social world through the objectification of universal ideas of beauty, mutuality, pleasure, individual self-creation, and higher unities of collective purpose and life. The satisfaction of false needs substitutes for the satisfaction of these true needs, but in such a totalizing and psychologically deep way that it seems impossible to effectively appeal to the hidden first nature as a political resource to be mobilized in the struggle for liberation. Despite the seeming impossibility, this move is exactly the one Marcuse makes.

In *An Essay on Liberation* Marcuse returns to the idea of the instincts first explored in *Eros and Civilization*, but for explicitly political purposes. He explores the possibility that perhaps the organic nature of human beings is itself a moral reality which, if it could be brought to consciousness, would constitute a ‘biological’ foundation for socialism. By ‘biological foundation’ Marcuse means that our primary needs for care, affective interaction, play, imagination, and peace, though they can be distorted, can never be fully negated. The failure of advanced capitalism to adequately satisfy these needs appears in consciousness as feelings of dissatisfaction, even when one’s life is rich in consumed commodities. He connects this idea of the biological foundation for socialism with what he called, following Freud, the life-instinct (Eros). Eros is the drive, present in all organic life, to join together to build “ever higher unities of life.” (Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p.12). The erotic instincts take conscious form in human history as the construction of institutional orders that enable individuals to develop their creative capabilities in wider and deeper ways. If people could understand that their feelings of dissatisfaction are rooted in the repression and distortion of these basic erotic drives, then this conscious recognition, Marcuse speculated, could become the psychic basis for the ‘transvaluation of values’ any progressive political change presupposed.

At this point it is necessary to gather together the threads of interpretation in a synthetic statement of Marcuse’s conception of the embodied good life. Like Nietzsche, Marcuse lays overriding stress on imaginative self-creation within a cooperative society as the highest potentiality of human social-organic nature. For Marcuse, the highest human need is to exist in a world in which imagination, rather than natural or social necessity, is the basis of construction of the social world and the individuals who live within it. Unlike Nietzsche, but like Marx, Marcuse contends that the predatory drive of life, at least in its human forms, is not a permanent consequence of the nature of life itself. There is a real instinctual basis to it, he agrees with Freud, but as material wealth increases the potential exists to pacify it, to sublimate it into a drive for peaceful mutuality and collective self-creation. Success in this endeavour demands overcoming the competitive relationships that continue to marshal aggression in the service of system needs. Freeing productive wealth for the satisfaction of true needs in a cooperative society would enable humans to turn their productive energies and capabilities to the construction of new and higher unities of life. As he claimed in *An Essay on Liberation*, “The goal is not merely self-realization, ... but new unities of life on earth.” (Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p. 46) In other words, the embodied good life for individuals is possible only in a new social order that prioritises true need satisfaction: peace, mutually enriching forms of interpersonal relationships, care,

beauty, and free self-expression.

If there is a problem to Marcuse's argument it is, (as McMurtry has pointed out in *Unequal Freedoms*), that he was never able to articulate with rigour, on the basis of a criterion people could apply themselves in reflecting upon their society, the precise difference between true and false needs. As a consequence, Marcuse left himself open to the charge from liberals that his was an authoritarian philosophy imposing from on high "needs" for emancipation that people did not express themselves. Because Marcuse failed to explicate the difference between true and false needs in life-grounded terms, he lacked the conceptual resources for a convincing response. Lacking a convincing reply to his critics, Marcuse arguments, powerful, original, and inspiring as they are in many respects, faded from view and interest with the waning of the counter-cultural and anti-imperialist movements of the late 1960's. His remains a vital contribution to the content of the idea of the embodied good life, but is not on its own fully consistent of comprehensive.

Comprehensiveness, perhaps, is not essential to basic ethical principles. Theodore Adorno, Marcuse's one time colleague, eschews comprehensiveness of scope for depth of affective impact. Whereas Marcuse's was primarily a positive philosophy of hope for liberation, Adorno's is primarily series of refusals of the substitute satisfactions of advanced capitalism in the name of bearing witness to its sacrificial victims, past and present. His work does not offer a positive account of the good life, but its testament to human suffering reminds philosophy that pain and deprivation ever threaten an embodied being. Any conception of the embodied good life that forgets this is, for Adorno, at best naive and at worst complicit.

6. Theodore Adorno: The Unbearable Hardness of Being

While Adorno shares with Marcuse roots in the tradition of Hegelian Marxism, his work contrasts with Marcuse, indeed, with that whole tradition, in refusing to posit positive alternatives to the forms of domination his social critique exposes. Whereas Marcuse followed Marx in criticising contemporary society on the basis of unrealized possibilities projected into the future as a critical ideal, Adorno concentrates on the actual suffering the present imposes on people. His critique of society is, to use his term, negative. 'Negative' is to be understood in the dialectical sense given to it by Hegel. The 'positive' is a fixed and given object of thought whereas the negative is the movement of thought itself as it ceaselessly exposes the inadequacy of particular attempts to grasp the truth of objects. Whereas for Hegel this inadequacy in ultimately resolved in a complete philosophical understanding of the rational order of the universe (translated by Marx into materialist terms as a society in which historical forms of conflict have been resolved), for Adorno criticism must remain negative if it is to remain critical. Hence Adorno never projects an ideal of the embodied good life in terms of the social conditions in which it could be fulfilled. He does, as will become clear, posit an idea of the embodied good life. That idea, like his philosophy as a whole, remains negative. In order to understand what this means it is necessary to begin with an overview of his challenging understanding of the basic contradiction that drives philosophical thought.

Adorno's major philosophical work, *Negative Dialectics*, is a complex reflection on the basic contradiction of philosophical thought. The world that the human mind tries to understand is composed of material particulars and the complex relations in which they are intertwined. The mind, however, can only think these objects and relations in terms of universal concepts that necessarily abstract from the particularities of the objects that it tries to know. Thought depends essentially on classification and classification must make abstraction from the elements of objects that make them distinct particulars. Take a simple example. If one is in a building and tries to think of where they are, one might say that they are in a particular room. The noun 'room' is a concept that is not reducible to the particular room that one is in, but would apply equally well to any room on the planet. It only refers to the room in which one is because one is there and is conscious of uttering it in that context. When one concentrates on the particular features of the room in which they are standing, it becomes apparent that it could be described in incompatible and inexhaustible ways. But to do the job that thought assigns itself in this (or any other case) abstraction from that inexhaustible wealth of details is necessary. Yet, in order to accomplish what is necessary (to locate oneself in that space) one must in fact ignore what makes the room in which one is all the concrete details that actually make it *this* room. One can truly say "I am in this room and not that room" but in so saying one at the same time does not say, in a way adequate to the actual complexity of the room, what makes it this room and not that. If one tried to accomplish that task one would expire before ever exhausting the particularities of the room.

The point of the example is that in order to think humans are forced to employ universal concepts which, no matter how one qualifies them, always and necessarily fall short of the material particulars they try to classify and comprehend. Rather than give in to skeptical despair, however, Adorno argues that thought must remain within this negative relationship to the world it is drawn toward but can never fully grasp. Negative dialectics is, in the simplest terms, the unending drive of thought to make itself adequate to material particularity. Each reversal that thought suffers, i.e., each time it realizes that there is yet another dimension to the object excluded by one attempt to grasp its truth, is a further chapter in an unending narrative of developing cognition. There is no end to this narrative precisely because thought can never grasp the whole of the universe without excluding some particular element or other. In a real and not metaphorical sense, as will become clear, Adorno believes that thought always does violence, in a sense, to material reality in the reductions it necessarily performs in its attempts to understand the whole. The problem, however, as will become clear, is the very abstractness of Adorno's own critique. Without an explicit life-grounded standard of evaluation, Adorno is unable to differentiate between forms of reductive analysis that enable life, and are this legitimate (for example, medical science) and those that are life-blind and destructive (for example, the cold calculations of military planners projecting 'collateral damage' from their attacks).

For the moment, however, Adorno's own argument must be explicated in further detail. To say that thought always does violence to material particularity is to say that thought is always exclusionary. By equating the truth of the object with the content of one concept, thought necessarily rules out other dimensions of the truth of the object not comprehended under that concept. The reality of this violence only becomes apparent, however, when the object of thought is another human being. All humans are both

subjects (active intellects engaged in trying to know and act within the world) and objects (of the thoughts and actions of others). Hence when a subject tries to know another subject, that other subject becomes, for the first, a mere object to be classified. To the extent that thought forgets its negativity and becomes positive it equates its categorization with the truth of the object. The other human as object, however, is never simply an object, but equally a subject (an active thinking being). To objectify others in thought, therefore, is to deny their human reality as thinking and active subjects.

The point Adorno is making becomes clear as soon as it is spelled out in more concrete terms. Take for example the way in which the Nazi's classified Jews. The classification of feeling, thinking human beings as 'Jews' marked them for death. For the Nazi, who identified truth with his system of thought, this classification was sufficient warrant for denying all human status— and thus any claim for human treatment— on the part of the person so classified. Thus, once thought forgets its essential negativity and rests content with its classificatory schemas as the truth of the object it becomes deaf and blind to the actual lived experience, and especially the harm and suffering, of the human beings whose truth it reduces to its categories. For Adorno the Holocaust is not simply a pathology of thinking. On the contrary, it is the truth of positive thinking expressed in its most stark form. For the Nazi, that which was killed in the death camps was not a living, breathing, suffering, in short, embodied human being, but simply a category whose essential nature entailed the need for its liquidation. Embodied particularity, self-consciousness, and the reality of pain is completely blocked from understanding when the logical implications of positive thought are materialised under conditions of political conflict. As Adorno says in *Minima Moralia*, "It is part of the mechanics of domination to forbid recognition of the suffering it produces." (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 63). On one level, forbidding recognition is accomplished by separating the un-indoctrinated from the sites of suffering. For the indoctrinated, however, for the perpetrators of the suffering, no such separation is possible. Nor, however, is it necessary, since their categorization cannot recognize the object of torture as a subject worthy of human consideration.

The horror of the Holocaust had a profound effect on Adorno's philosophy and it was necessary to discuss it if his negative conception of the embodied good life is to be understood. The sheer scale of killing in the Second World War was, for Adorno, the historical refutation of all utopian thought. Henceforth criticism could remain critical only by dragging consciousness back to its experiential basis. That means simply that philosophy had to attend to, focus upon, the actual suffering of people in the world. Flights to the metaphysical ether of a utopian future were, Adorno concluded, simply other ways in which positive thought avoided the reality of suffering. Hence for Adorno the embodied good life could only be defined in negative terms: as not-suffering. As he says poignantly in *Minima Moralia*, "There is tenderness only in the simplest demand— that no one should go hungry anymore." (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 156). Philosophy can remain true to its critical essence only in attending constantly to the embodied human reality of physical suffering and demanding that it cease.

Through this constant attention to the embodied reality of suffering Adorno hopes that consciousness can be shaken from its positivistic self-enclosure in which it cannot

differentiate between forms of analysis that enable life, and are thus legitimate (for example, holistic medical science) and those that are life-blind and destructive, (for example, the calculi of system planners for whom preventable deaths are abstracted out as “externalities” or “collateral damage”). For Adorno this self-enclosure is literally a form of living death. In what he calls the totally administered society, where peoples’ desires are programmed and where they feel happy only in response to the pre-programmed satisfaction of those desires, life cease to be life (spontaneous activity and self-direction). Again his own words make the point most clearly: “It is as if the reified plaster cast of events takes the place of events themselves. Men are reduced to walk-on roles in a monster documentary film.” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p. 55). There is no arguing against this situation precisely because, as Marcuse’s conception of one-dimensionality made clear, any concepts that such an argument would employ have already been redefined to serve the system’s self-replication. The only way to break through, therefore, is to re-activate experience, i.e., attention to the particularity of other humans.

As is clear from the above, Adorno concentrates on focussing attention on the actual damage done to concrete embodied individuals. Nevertheless, he does permit himself at times to speculate about the most general values of an alternative form of life. In keeping with the negative character of his philosophy Adorno’s alternative is not spelled out in any detail, perhaps to guard against misinterpreting it as a political plan or program. Instead, to the extent that it can be said to have content, it is content that is determined simply by its being the antithesis of the dominant value system. The primary value that drives the totally administered society is, according to Adorno, a hyperactive productivity that destroys the affective dimension of human experience. If the consequence of reason, according to Adorno, is the transformation of the whole world of life and nature into mere means, and the consequence of this instrumentalization of life and nature is domination and brutalization, then the a free society would have to be based on the opposite value. The opposite of this hyper-productivity is peace, in the pure sense of inactivity. Again, it is best to quote Adorno: “The naive supposition of unambiguous development towards increased production is itself a piece of bourgeois outlook which permits development in only one direction, because, integrated into a totality, dominated by quantification, it is hostile to qualitative differences ... Perhaps the true society will grow tired of development and, out of freedom, leave possibilities unused ... *rien faire, comme une bete*, lying on water and looking peacefully in the sky, being, nothing else, without further determination and fulfilment, might take the place of process, act, satisfaction.” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, pp.. 156-7).

In order to maintain connection to the idea of the embodied good life Adorno feels compelled to break the link, clearly established in Marx and maintained by Marcuse, between the good for humans and the ever increasing production of social wealth. This incessant drive towards the production of more and more is the deep cause of the domination of humans by their creations. To be liberated, in Adorno’s conception, is to be liberated from the drive to produce and create and thus to return to the quiescence of experience whose essential nature is to let the things of the world show themselves to us. To do nothing for Adorno is not, therefore, to become inert, but to open oneself up to the complex particularity the dominant form of rationality necessarily closes off.

At the same time, however, this conception of liberation is at odds with the practice of negative dialectics. Recall that the practice of negative dialectics was distinguished from positive dialectics by its refusal to accept the wholeness of any determined state. Adorno's point was that since determination always involves violence to the complexity of material particulars, every universal truth claim had to be negated, in an open ended process whose justification was the need to contest the domination over life that all fixed claims to truth express. Yet this ultimate affirmation of peaceful contemplation reveals the inherent weakness of this practice as *the* practice of critical philosophy. From within the movement of negative dialects it becomes impossible to distinguish between structures of thought that are life-blind, or that reduce life-value to instrumentally exploitable inputs of machine-like processes, from structures of thought that are more comprehensively adequate to and inclusive of the *full range of life-value expressed in different ways by different bearers of life within more encompassing conception* (an epistemic value system developed in Chapter What is Good?What is Bad?

In sum, it is possible to argue that Adorno unwittingly succumbs to the very fragmentation of human life that he charged the totally administered society with imposing on people. If there is one key idea that links all the thinkers examined here, it is that the embodied good life, whatever its content and social conditions, returns human beings to a state of integral unity of body and consciousness, imagination and reason, thought and action. Adorno's conception of peace, important though it may be as a corrective to capitalist hyper-productivity, perhaps gives up too easily on the possibility of a different form of reason and action, a form which, as Marx and Marcuse both hoped, would free creative self and world transformation from the destructive forms it has taken. Adorno's value lies in his reminding humanity of the centrality of affect and experience to human life. Separated out from the wider field of human capabilities, however, it threatens to become yet another one-sided conception of humanity that his negative dialects set itself against. As McMurtry explains in Chapter "What is Good, What is Bad: The Value of all Values Through Time, Place, and Theories," , reason and emotion are not essentially counterposed in human consciousness, but ultimately express the felt and cognitive sides of the human being's awareness of the world that forms the ultimate life-support system of all. It is only as this integrative opening awareness as caring is activated in new forms of creative, solidaristic action that the self and the real bases of each's life-support- natural and social, can be vitally comprehended. A truly human peace cannot be the peace of the animal, because humans are capable of wider and deeper ranges of creative action and caring expression, not only towards their own kind, but ultimately towards all existence of which they are individuated expressions. Human peace, in this view, is a dynamic process given to the plentitude of this co-creation and individuated expression, not the placid repose of the well-fed animal afloat on the world.

The last two thinkers to be considered here, Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum, implicitly draw upon this difference between the human and the animal in their conception of the embodied good life. They remind us that outside the zones of advanced consumer capitalism there lies an immiserated mass of human beings for whom embodiment is not the basis of the good life, but a daily torment of hunger and

deprivation.

7. Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum: Human Capabilities and Global Justice

In some respects ending this examination of the embodied good life with the work of Sen and Nussbaum returns it to its beginning– to Aristotle and his conception of the essence of humanity as the forms of activity that distinguish it from other species. Prior to meeting and working with Sen, Nussbaum was an incisive interpreter of Aristotle interested in developing his insights into the social and embodied nature of human beings as an alternative to the one-sided egocentric rationalism of liberal philosophy. Her encounter with Sen and his ‘capabilities approach’ to social justice supplied a new socio-economic framework for her earlier Aristotelian conception of human capabilities. As with the previous analyses, so too here the focus will not be on providing a genetic account of the development of Sen and Nussbaum’s capabilities approach to social justice. Nor will it examine in any detail the similarities and differences existing between Sen and Nussbaum. Instead, their work will be explicated from a synthetic perspective. The sole interest is in explaining it as the high point of liberal thinking about the embodied good life. The weaknesses that ultimately emerge will provide a context for looking back over the historical development of idea of the embodied good life in Western philosophy and allow for the drawing up of general conclusions.

Since the pioneering work in the development of the capabilities approach to social justice was undertaken by Sen it will serve purposes of clarity to begin with an overview of his motivations for developing it . It was his work as an economist that caused him to abandon the neo-classical understanding of welfare and his work as a philosopher that caused him to reject the dominant liberal consensus about the meaning of equality. In neo-classical economics, welfare is defined as preference satisfaction and identified uncritically with consumer demand. This identification completely elides the difference between life-requirements and mere demands for commodities. Whereas the deprivation of real life-requirement always results in verifiable harm to human beings, the deprivation of consumer demands not only does not cause harm, it in fact frees the subject from the sorts of domination that Marcuse and Adorno analysed and thus opens them towards more inclusive forms of activity and experience. (McMurtry, *Unequal Freedoms*, p. 164). From the neo-classical perspective there are neither needs nor capabilities save what the capitalist market supplies as products for purchase and consumes as labour. Sen’s work in the poorest regions of India awoke him from the dogmatic slumber of neoclassical theory and pushed him to search for a more egalitarian economic theory grounded in a more coherent and exigent conception of human well being.

The dominant model of egalitarian theory at the time, that of John Rawls, was also found wanting by Sen. Rawls’ understanding of a just society as one in which the distribution of socially primary goods was determined by the difference principle– all goods are to be distributed equally unless an unequal distribution made the least advantaged better off– was problematic. Sen’s objection is that Rawl’s conception of distributive justice ignores the fact that because human beings are different, they require different levels of resources in order to attain the same outcomes. As the real goal of

human life, that which makes it valuable, is the realization of our defining capabilities (ways of being and doing) Rawls, Sen claimed, mistook means for ends. While this objection overlooks the deeper life-grounded criticism that Rawls' simply assumes the neo-classical economic measure of "optimal distributions" as Pareto optimality (whatever is to be distributed is optimal if no one can receive more without someone else receiving less, a measure assumed to coincide with "free" market distributions), he nevertheless does indicate a certain superficiality in Rawls' conception of justice. Equality of resources is not an intrinsic human good, it is a means towards the end of enabling people to do and be what they have reason to do and be. If doing and being is the goal, then the means are only sound if they attain the goal. Since strict equality of resources contradicts the goal, it cannot be the means to a good society. Instead, the distribution of resources must take into account different levels of need if equality of human functioning is to be achieved. (Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 1999, p. 74).

Nussbaum began working with Sen in 1986 and immediately seized upon his emerging capabilities approach as a means of giving social and economic concreteness to her work in political philosophy. The details of the encounter are not important. Rather, at this point it is best to simply unpack the core ideas of the capabilities approach as it has developed since the mid-eighties, treating it as the highpoint of a liberal idea of the embodied good life.

Sen and Nussbaum's main interest lies in advancing the demand that public policy recognise basic need satisfaction as an essential human right. That is, they are less interested in developing an account of the human good than they in advancing a theory of social justice that builds on, but diverges from, the core principles of egalitarian liberal philosophy. The problem, as will become clear, lies in their inability to free the life-grounded elements of their argument from the hold of the liberal idea of abstract individual choice of meaningful goals. While their recognition of the life-blind failures of public policy to ensure basic need satisfaction is a significant advance over classical liberal ideas of mere equality of rights, their own inability to think critically about the difference between life-grounded and life-indifferent goals ultimately compromises the significance of their work for the philosophical understanding of life-support systems.

In so far as both Sen and Nussbaum share certain fundamental ideas of the liberal tradition— the importance of individual choice, the need to avoid paternalism in public policy, and the priority of political 'liberty' over economic equality their conception of the embodied good life differs in important respects from its development in the Marxist tradition. Sen and Nussbaum both stress that the aim of public policy is not to ensure equal capability realization, but rather what they call 'equal capability to function.' The difference between capability realization and capability to function is important to both. Since they assume that individual differences are given facts, and that from the fact of individual difference follows both different levels of need and different concrete goals, they are wary of placing too much normative value on achieved outcomes. Instead they provide more robust attention to the social and material conditions of free choice than is typically found in the classic liberal tradition stemming from Locke. (For the limitations of the tradition of liberal rights as the basis of need satisfaction see Chapter, "Life Blind Liberalism and Life Grounded Democracy,") Instead of mere formal rights, Sen and Nussbaum emphasise the role of social rights in establishing claims on needed

resources. Once individuals are furnished with the range of resources they need, (factoring in their differences) people will be in a position to actually choose different ways of life they have reason to value. Hence their theory is less a theory of the content of the embodied good life than it is a defence of the idea that each individual must fill out the content of an embodied good life for themselves. The role of political philosophy is therefore not to foreclose on people's choices by defining the content of the embodied good life in advance. On the contrary, it is to defend the normative principles that society must adhere to if its citizens are to be able to choose any *human* life at all.

The real strength of Sen and Nussbaum's position is to stress against neo-classical relativism and classical liberal egocentric psychologism the reality of harm for embodied human beings. Since both neo-classical thought and classical liberalism abstract from the embodied reality of human beings and concentrate simply on choice and its legal matrices neither can easily comprehend harm as objective. Sen and Nussbaum, by contrast, starting from a conception of the human being as an embodied and needful being, with an organic nature that crosses differences of sex and culture, identify the body and its needs as an anchor for a universal conception of harm. This universal conception of harm in turn forms the basis for an international ethic capable in principle of exposing the deep forms of injustice visited upon the poor and need-deprived wherever they happen to exist. This ethic does not entail uniformity of social organization but uniformity of principles governing social institutions. That principle would mandate the adequate satisfaction of human needs such that every person has an equal capability to decide upon and pursue the goals that they take to be individually meaningful.

However, the strength of their conception of the embodied good life is also, in the specific form that they present it, its weakness. The idea that human life-value is essentially the free realization of the defining capabilities of the human as a social organic being is an idea that links all the thinkers examined in this overview. The real differences enter into the theories at the level of the distinct understanding of the social conditions requisite for the real attainment of this goal. The form of liberal individualism that Sen and Nussbaum preserve creates difficulties for understanding the limitations that the globalization of capitalist market forces and its attendant value-sets poses for the realization of the idea of the embodied good life. In particular, the idea of free individual choice of life-goals cannot be properly understood if it is treated in abstraction from the natural and social fields of life support. If one insists, with Nussbaum, on the "separateness of lives from one another" then one lacks the foundations to criticise forms of individual choice and activity that are either destructive of life-support systems, or contribute nothing to their maintenance and development. (Nussbaum, *Sex and Social Justice*, p. 10). The type of society implied by Sen and Nussbaum's conception of the embodied good life depends upon a reconsideration of the idea of free individual choice. In their conclusions Sen and Nussbaum disavow any basis of criticism of the content of the goals that individuals have reason to choose. Hence if a person, fully furnished with need satisfies by the resources produced by collective social labour were to choose to do nothing with the capabilities it is now possible for them to realize, there is nothing that Sen and Nussbaum have to say in criticism. The relativism that they expel from the level of

social policy choices (policy must satisfy needs and not certain group's unreflective preferences) reappears at the level of *individual life choices*, in so far as the absence of explicit life-grounding for the aims of life leaves them with no non-arbitrary, non-paternalistic way of criticising life-blind or life-indifferent goals. Yet the whole success of their argument depends upon an understanding of human beings as necessarily interdependent. It is this material interdependence that underlies their argument in support of positive rights to need- satisfying resources. Any society that actually implemented these principles would thereby require a sense of individuality distinct from the conception typical of liberalism, including the more complex liberalism that developed in the twentieth century and which Sen and Nussbaum both draw upon. It would depend, in other words, on a conception of individual activity as good when it combines in itself individual meaning and social life-value. Otherwise the duties of material aid that Nussbaum believes citizens owe one another not only would not be met, they would not even be an object of consciousness for citizens except by exhortation. The liberal idea of individuality is an idea of an individual that owes nothing to anyone save what they individually and freely contract with others to do. There can be no overall social duty in liberal philosophy to ground individuality itself, although it is just this sort of duty that is implied in the idea of a society that prioritises need satisfaction and capability development over merely private self-maximization.(See Chapter Human Rights and Global Life-Support Systems).

8. Conclusion: Life-Grounded Synthesis

Together, the perspectives on the embodied good life examined in this chapter spell out its essential content. What is missing from all together, because missing from each separately, is a principle of synthesis that enables anyone, no matter where they are situated, to distinguish true life-requirements from system-preserving desires and worthwhile life-activity from wasteful life-activity. This principle of synthesis has been with us throughout the investigation, diversely presupposed by, but never made explicit, in any of the conceptions of the embodied good life examined. This principle is the principle of the life-ground of value. Its role has been mentioned in passing at several points in this chapter. In conclusion it remains only to spell its meaning out systematically and explain how it allows us to distinguish with certainty (if not always with ease) between what is truly good for embodied humans, what is not, and what is truly harmful.

As McMurtry was the first to systematically explain, the life-ground of value is, in the most general sense, the totality of natural and social conditions of life-maintenance and development. The life-ground is equally a basis of understanding and evaluation because it is equally fact and value. To locate one's thinking in the life-ground and to allow one's thinking to be guided by it is, by this very fact, to learn to think and judge possibilities in terms of the value of "[turning] life into more vitally comprehensive life by means of life." (McMurtry, *Value Wars*, p. 74). All the different conceptions explored here have, in their distinct (and sometimes one-sided ways) expressed this underlying unifying idea of the embodied good life. Yet none explicitly grasps, understands, or judges from its life-ground itself. As a consequence, all the various articulations explored here suffer from one of two general problems: either they make invidious value distinctions that impute more essential life-value to 'superior' groups

(Aristotle and Nietzsche), or they have no comprehensive explanation of what actually makes different forms of life-activity good rather than bad. In other words, they make life-value relative to a one-sided conception of value that is unique to their theory, as Marx does with his notion of labour, or Sen and Nussbaum do with their idea of autonomous choice. Only by consciously grounding ethical argument in the life-ground of value can these key problems be resolved.

In regard to the first problem, the life-ground of value discloses that the cause of differences of life-value for individuals is the ruling value system of the social field of life-support. In contrast to Aristotle and Nietzsche, who both posit abstract naturalistic causes for differences seated in individuals capabilities for life-value realization, the life-ground of value examines the way in which ruling value systems select for life-blind and life-destroying modes of resource production and distribution. Capabilities cannot be developed and enjoyed, much less developed and enjoyed freely, by force of will alone. Life-requirement satisfaction is the material (natural and social) condition for the free development and enjoyment of human capabilities and life itself. If social relations are organized such that one or more groups are forced into the position of being mere servants of the ruling group, their degree of life-requirement satisfaction limited to what is necessary to enable them merely to reproduce themselves for the sake of the system's ability to reproduce itself, then it is clear that the range of capabilities the servant groups will be able to develop will be inferior to the range of capabilities the ruling group is able to develop. The inferiority of expression, however, does not follow from innate 'natural' inferiority, but from inequality in life-requirement satisfaction. The flowering of formerly oppressed groups' creative and constructive capabilities in moments where their struggles against oppression are successful is sufficient historical evidence against invidious ideologies of natural superiority and inferiority.

In relation to the second problem, the life-ground of value situates itself politically not on the side of one class, or gender, or sexuality, or ethnicity *because* it is a certain class, gender, sexuality, or ethnicity, but always on the side of maximizing the widest range and deepest expressions of life-value (free-capability development and enjoyment). It follows from this goal that oppressive and exploitative social relations are always antithetical to the goal of life-value maximization, and for that reason a life-grounded politics is always on the side of the historically oppressed. However— and this is where the life-grounded conception of the embodied good life differs from both Marxism and egalitarian liberalism— it imposes no limits or preferred forms on the modes of realization of human sentient, motor, cognitive, and imaginative capabilities. It does not discount any life value nor dichotomize contemplation and construction, sensation and ratiocination, nor does it affirm some one historically and culturally specific form of institutional organization and the forms of self-understanding it normalises as superior. For example, this standpoint does not regard ancient indigenous life-ways as “beneath the level of history” nor indeed does it insist upon the value of autonomy as understood in the egocentric traditions of liberal philosophy as a necessary element of the embodied good life. Instead, it reveals the shared conditions of meaningful and valuable human life in the universal natural and social fields of life support of each and all. Once those conditions are clear, the real interdependence of human life becomes manifest, and the opposition between good for self and good for whole dissolves. Nothing can be good for self in the life-grounded conception that does not thereby improve the conditions of

life. Since those conditions of life are shared with all, that which is good for self in the life-grounded view is good for all by transitivity.

The particular ways in which a life of free capability development and enjoyment may be lived is always an open question and will necessarily vary in different contexts and among different people. Yet the embodied good life is, from the perspective of this unifying form, the same for all– free, life-serving capability development and enjoyment– but as regards content, necessarily varies as the talents, interests, goals, and contributions of free people equally committed to the health of the natural and social world vary and individuate in expression.

Glossary

Alienation	In Marx, the state of being dominated by one's own vital, creative capabilities, as a consequence of forms of social organization in which reified powers like money rule over human needs.
Capabilities	That which living things are able to by virtue of their being alive (e.g., feel, sense, think, and so forth). As such, capabilities are the source of life-value for living things in so far as they are expressed and enjoyed.
Communism	In Marx, a free society constructed on the basis of collective ownership of need-satisfying natural and social resources, possible only once class division between workers and capitalists has been overcome.
Forces of Production	In Marx, the human-made tools (including science), natural resources, and organized productive labor out of which any given society reproduces and develops its material conditions of existence
Good	Classically, the ultimate goal and reason of all human action; as embodied, the expression and enjoyment of the highest capabilities of which human beings are capable.
Needs	the real life-requirements of living beings, defined by McMurtry as that without which their organic capacities are reduced.
Negative Dialectics	Adorno's term for a relentlessly critical form of thought that refuses to accept any conceptual synthesis as adequate to the reality it conceives.
One-dimensionality	In relation to social organization, a state in which the meaning of universal terms like Freedom or Equality is reduced to their functional role in justifying prevailing social powers and institutions.
Performance Principle	The forms of life demanded by social organization (Freud) which Marcuse criticizes as one-dimensional.
Potentiality	In Aristotle, that which the souls of living things encode as the metaphysical basis of their life-activity.
Relations of Production	In Marx, the way in which resource ownership and labour control is organized in any society.
Slave Morality	In Nietzsche, any moral system that constrains the power of the physically and intellectually strong over the weak.

Soul	In Aristotle, the active principle that produces life in a material being.
Will to Power	In Nietzsche, the force that drives all living things to seek to conquer and exploit other life for their own ends.

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Biographical Sketch

Jeff Noonan was born in 1968 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. He received his B.A (Philosophy and Social and Political Thought) from York University (Toronto) in 1991, his M.A (Philosophy) in 1993 and his Ph.D (Philosophy) 1996 from McMaster University (Hamilton). He taught as Visiting Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Alberta (Edmonton) between 1996 and 1998. He is currently Associate Professor and Department Head of Philosophy at the University Windsor, and serves on the Coordinating Committee of the Centre for Studies in Social Justice and the Coordinating Committee of the Program in Labour Studies. He is the author of *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*, (McGill Queen’s University Press, 2003) and *Democratic Society and Human Needs*, (McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2006). He has published widely in such journals as *Dialogue: Canadian Philosophical Reviews*, *Philosophy Today*, *Res Publica*, *Social Theory and Practice*, and *Rethinking Marxism*, and is a co-editor of *Studies in Social Justice*.