

**The purpose of philosophy and Karl Marx's
'Towards a Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: Introduction'**

1. Preliminaries

The main relationship between the big question of 'How to justify socialism?' and my present paper is that I am not attempting to answer it. Instead, I choose a very limited focus and only talk about one short text: Marx's '*Towards a Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: Introduction*' of 1844 (henceforth *Introduction to the Critique*).¹ I suspect that one can rely on elements of the text to defend what I think is the correct answer to the question of justification, namely that one should justify socialism by normative argument, however, my present aim is much less ambitious: To make sense of the *Introduction to the Critique*.

(a) What is the Problem?

The *Introduction to the Critique* never met the originally intended destiny of serving as the introduction to a longer book, and only reached a marginal audience in the year of its original publication. However, it can be considered as one of the main textual sources for positions popularly ascribed to Marx. An explanation for the prominence and widespread reception of certain passages of the text is, however, not so much found in a prevalent agreement on the conclusiveness of the actual arguments, but rather in the text's inspiring rhetorical quality and its rich use of seductive metaphors. Unfortunately, the linguistic virtue of the text is its philosophical vice. The often-elliptical mode of presentation in combination with a vast array of references to 19th century history (of ideas), as well as the treatment of several apparently unrelated subject matters inhibits a clear and facile understanding of Marx's argument and the theoretical points at stake. Sceptically minded readers may even wonder, whether – given the prima facie evidence to the contrary - there are any such points at all, or at least whether there are any points that could stand the critical scrutiny of a contemporary audience. Shall we then in approaching the *Introduction to the Critique* view the text as at worst a source of aphoristic eloquence and at best as a polemic in the political and philosophical struggles of the 19th century?

¹ Karl Marx, 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction', in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

(b) If this is the problem, what is my solution?

I will argue two things. Firstly, the *Introduction to the Critique* raises an important philosophical question. And secondly, Marx's answer to this question is supported by good argument. The question underlying the razzmatazz of the *IC* is this: What is the proper role of philosophy? Marx's answer partly anticipates arguments of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*² and one can accept a variation of the 11th of *Theses on Feuerbach* as central to the concern of the *IC*. Marx's position can be summarized by two related propositions:

(T1): The proper role of philosophy is to change the world.

(T2): Philosophy can only change the world by taking a non-speculative form and choosing specific social objects of inquiry.

Because the arguments for (T1) and (T2) are not elaborated very explicitly and rather figure as the background thread or unifying bracket of the text, I proceed in two steps: (1) Reconstruction of the text yields the question 'What is the purpose of philosophy?' as central, and precedes (2) scrutiny of the arguments in defence of Marx's answer.

STEP 1: RECONSTRUCTION

One can usefully divide the *IC* into three sections, each dealing with a separate subject matter: (i) Religion, (ii) German politics and philosophy and (iii) The Proletariat.

2. Religion

Although the section on religion provides a number of famous and celebrated quotes - 'the opium of the people' or the 'flower on the chain' - it is only of secondary or derivative importance to the main arguments of the text. Referring to the works of his contemporaries Feuerbach, Strauss and Bauer, Marx himself notes: "The criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism."³ Indeed, the first paragraphs of the text combine a Feuerbachian spirit with the method and language of Bauer, developing historical and psychological explanations to account for religious phenomena.

² Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books 1988, 1844).

³ Marx (1977) p. 63

It is then indirectly that the paragraphs on religion support Marx's theses about the purpose of philosophy:

“The first task of philosophy which is in the service of history, once the holy form of human self-alienation has been discovered, is to discover self-alienation in its unholy forms. The criticism of heavens is thus transformed into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics. The following exposition - a contribution to this task - does not deal with the original but with its copy, the German philosophy of the state and law.”⁴

The case of religion, as a target of an early-stage criticism, illustrates Marx's general point, namely that philosophy is to be equated with criticism. At the heart of thought-activity one does not find contemplative truth, but ultimately there is criticism aimed at altering the world.

3. German Politics and German Philosophy

“The following exposition - a contribution to this task - does not deal with the original but with its copy, the German philosophy of the state and law.” But if the aim of philosophy is to criticise and alter the world, why not proceed from the criticism of religion directly to the criticism of real circumstances? Why does Marx take a detour via Hegel, a copy of his real object of interest? The answer to this question unfolds when comparing the state of German politics to the state of German philosophy in the middle of the 19th century.

Initially, the political situation in Germany appears the most suitable object for criticism. Germany's political and social backwardness invites devastating criticism. However, the backwardness not only requires criticism, it also renders any interesting criticism impossible. The German context does not offer a framework for addressing genuine human problems. To find solutions for the problems unsolved in the case of Germany, one would only have to take a look at the more advanced European countries.

⁴ Marx (1977) p.64

However, there is one respect in which Germany is superior to, or on a higher stage of development than any other country: Philosophy. To formulate criticism that is at the forefront or pinnacle of development, and not already antiquarian, German philosophy, i.e. the philosophy of Hegel has to be the object of criticism:

“We are philosophical contemporaries without being historical ones. German philosophy is the ideal prolongation of German history. [...] The German philosophy of law and of the state is the only theory in German history that stands al pari with the official modern present.”⁵

Taking Hegel’s philosophy as a starting point, Marx combines the practical perspective of Feuerbach with the speculative one of Bauer: Theory finds its realization through practice and thereby ceases to be theory, whereas a certain practice or aspects of reality are transformed by the impact of theory: “You cannot transcend philosophy without realizing it [...] but in tasks for which there is only one solution: Praxis.”⁶ And: “Once it was the monk’s brain in which the revolution began, now it is in the philosopher’s.”⁷

4. The Proletariat

It is the purpose of philosophy to change the world. However, the world can only be changed through agents acting upon the real world. The origin of the revolution might be found in the brain of the philosopher, but the revolutionary subject is not the philosopher:

“As philosophy finds in the proletariat its material weapons, so the proletariat finds in philosophy its intellectual weapons, and as soon as the lightning of thought has struck deep into the virgin soil of the people, the emancipation of the Germans into men will be completed [...] The head of its emancipation is philosophy; its heart is the Proletariat. Philosophy cannot realize itself without transcending the Proletariat, the Proletariat cannot transcend itself without realizing philosophy”.⁸

⁵ Marx (1977) p.67

⁶ *ibid.* p.68

⁷ *ibid.* p.69

⁸ *ibid.* p.73

The significance of the Proletariat is twofold. Firstly, a conscious working class is the historical bearer of revolutionary impetus. The Proletariat is important as the agent of revolution. Secondly, the Proletariat is synonymous to deprivation, and it is the tension between the philosophical ideal and a negative, deprived reality that is conducive to radical change. The Proletariat is a universal class in the sense that it is universally deprived; philosophy offers the way out of this universal deprivation.

Stemming from an amalgamation of German idealism and French history – Marx’s conception of the Proletariat seems to combine motives from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Adolphe Thiers’s history of the French revolution – how does the section of the Proletariat contribute to the establishment of Marx’s theses about the proper purpose of philosophy? If real political change presupposes certain material conditions to be met, and if philosophy ought to be concerned with altering the world, it can only fulfil its purpose by relating to material reality in an appropriate way. Only a philosophy that does not lose grip of real social developments can become critical and radical. “A radical revolution can only be a revolution of radical needs.”⁹ Philosophy then must recognize and incorporate these radical needs. Otherwise the option of altering the world becomes unavailable.

5. Religion, German Philosophy and the Proletariat in Synthesis

Religion

- (i) Left-Hegelian criticism of religion establishes the paradigm of philosophy as criticism.
- (ii) The criticism of religion is the prelude to the criticism of political and social relations.

German Politics and German Philosophy

- (iii) In the case of Germany, criticism cannot have social and political relations as its object, but focuses on philosophy itself.
- (iv) A critique of German Philosophy (i.e. a critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*) reveals that the true purpose of philosophy is not found in speculative contemplation but in actively changing the world.

⁹ *ibid.* p.70

Proletariat

- (v) The Proletariat, as revolutionary subject and as standing for universal deprivation, is the practical vehicle for philosophy to realize its purposes.

‘What is the purpose of philosophy’ – This is the question raised by the *IC*. The claim that the proper role of philosophy is to change the world by relating to social reality in a critical mode is the upshot of the five propositions drawn from the individual sections of the *IC*.

STEP 2 THE ARGUMENTS

Having recognized the purpose of philosophy as Marx’s subject, the question of whether his two theses are supported by valid and sound arguments arises. I will consider three argumentative strategies which Marx seems to employ, and argue that only the last one is successful.

6. From a particularly German premise to a general conclusion

A general thesis about the nature of philosophy seems to be based on particular observations about philosophy in a particular context. For example: Because in Germany backward social and political relations stand in contrast with a version of philosophy that intellectually solves the problems of these relations, emancipation from these relations takes place by realizing the propositions of philosophy. But as long as the conclusion of any such argument is intended to support a general thesis, we are left with an unsatisfactory account:

(P 1) If ‘German circumstances’ then ‘(T1) and (T2)’

(P2) German Circumstances

(C) ‘(T1) and (T2)’

This argument is valid. However, it does not serve Marx’s purposes well: The conclusion rests on the conditional antecedent of the ‘German circumstances’, which is too weak

and contingent a premise to establish the general claim that philosophy ought to alter the world by criticizing social and economic relations.

To mend this problem one could try to argue that German circumstances are in some way paradigmatic or special. If you for example replace (P2) by (P2')

(P 2') Necessarily 'German Circumstances'

the general nature of the conclusion ceases to be a problem. If German circumstances are necessary or universal, they can serve as an argumentative basis for general claims about philosophy.

But why should the case of Germany be paradigmatic in this sense? One argumentative device in a Marxist spirit seems to be this one:

(P2*) 'German circumstances' are necessary because historical development necessarily moves through 'German circumstances'

The drawback of this additional premise, however, is the high philosophical cost at which it comes to the contemporary reader. For (P2*) to be effective, contentious assumptions about linearity in development, historic dynamics and inevitability need to hold. Retrospectively, these assumptions render (P2*) implausible. To accept (P2*) would not only be to take on board historical materialism, but an especially fancy version of it. If the thesis on the purpose of philosophy can then only be supported in its general nature by a premise like (P2*), one might come to find it insufficiently grounded.

7. The stylistic and argumentative device of chiasmus

Throughout the *Introduction to the Critique*, Marx makes use of a stylistic device where the syntactic elements of parallel phrases stand in an inverted relationship. As this chiasmus recurs frequently and makes a defining feature of the text, one might suspect that it is also doing some argumentative work. Before examining whether such a claim could be maintained, let us consider these two examples:

- (a) “This school, the Historical School of Law, would have invented German history, had it not been itself an invention of German history.”¹⁰
- (b) “In its struggle against this situation criticism is no passion of the head, it is the head of passion.”¹¹

The juxtaposition of inverted terms can be understood as expressing the general philosophical intention of revealing something true behind the superficially assumed. The genuine purpose of philosophy is something else than what Marx’s contemporaries assumed, and by inverting the standard assumption one arrives at a true proposition. Philosophy is not a speculative passion of the head, but it is the head of passion, i.e. it is practically involved in real affairs. One can either understand this revelation by inversion as a merely linguistic instrument - for example as capturing and making vivid what has already been elaborated - or as doing real argumentative work.

How could the chiasmus contribute to the argumentative force of Marx’s points? It seems that there are two options available, and I argue that each of them fails.

Firstly, relating to the above-mentioned point of revelation-by-inversion, the chiasmus can be interpreted as belonging to a substantial philosophical position. In a Hegelian context, the structure of the chiasmus belongs to a logical device: The syntactic elements stand in a dialectical relation towards each other. You turn xyz into xzy by finding xyz to be insufficient. Because of this insufficiency, the position xyz posits its opposite, which in the cases we considered is xzy. You arrive at the true nature of things by inverting what is apparent or given. However, such a mechanism can only be rendered intelligible on the background of Hegelian metaphysics. Without going into the details of any such position, one conclusion can be drawn: The assumptions needed to make sense of the chiasmus, as a genuinely logical device or philosophical method, are hard to accept from a contemporary perspective.

¹⁰ *ibid.* p. 69

¹¹ *ibid.* p. 65

Secondly, in the context of standard binary logic, the chiasmus does not have much purchase either. Unlike standard structures such as the modus ponens or the modus tollens, the chiasmus is not a valid rule of inference. Even if you take xyz and xzy to be mutually exclusive, the truth of the one does not follow from the falsity of the other. Once you have independently shown that xzy is true and xyz is false, the chiasmus can be an interesting way of presenting your results, yet it does nothing to arrive at these results. At best, it is an instrument of illustration *ex poste*. The chiasmus contributes to the literary quality of the text; it does not contribute to its philosophical power.

8. Normative argument and philosophical anthropology

Many passages from the *Introduction to the Critique* appear to be developed on the background of something that is not explicitly spelled out. Marx mentions that (i) man “must seek his true reality”,¹² that (ii) “criticism raises itself to the level of truly human problems”,¹³ and that (iii) the Proletariat needs to “recover itself by a complete redemption of humanity”.¹⁴ Terms like the ‘true reality of man’ and the ‘level of truly human problems’ presuppose a theory of what the truly human is, of what men ought to be, which is to say they build on a philosophical anthropology. Even though an explicit philosophical anthropology is absent from the *IC*, it is such a theory that accounts for much of the argumentative force of Marx’s points. In fact, the picture of the human being that is elaborated in the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*¹⁵ fits in with the claims of the *IC* and can be taken as a supporting ground for Marx’s attempt to establish his theses about the purpose of philosophy. I shall briefly sketch the main tenets of the philosophical anthropology of the *Manuscripts* and then develop the relationship between the account of what it is to be a human being and the claim that philosophy ought to change the world.

The picture of man developed in the section on estranged labour in the *Manuscripts* comprises a number of different features. Elements of Marx’s philosophical anthropology (PA), which can also be understood as a theory of human flourishing, are:

¹² *ibid.* p. 63

¹³ *ibid.* p. 66

¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 73

¹⁵ Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.

- (PA1) Man owns his physical and mental energies and capacities.¹⁶
- (PA2) Man is free in his human activity and in using his capacities.¹⁷
- (PA3) The life-activity of man is productive activity: labouring upon nature.¹⁸
- (PA4) Man is conscious of his productive activity and its purposes.¹⁹

These four propositions make up the main body of the young Marx's philosophical anthropology. At the same time they ground Marx's argument about the purpose of philosophy.

A theory of human flourishing provides the background for a normative argument about the purpose of philosophy. Why is it the purpose of philosophy to alter the world? Because only by altering the world can man be enabled to live freely and consciously and enjoy a form of non-alienating labour. Questions concerning Marx's philosophical anthropology are the 'truly human problems'; the satisfaction of the conditions of flourishing in social and political relations constitutes the 'true reality' and 'complete redemption of humanity':

- (P1) Men ought to be able to freely exercise their mental and physical abilities and enjoy forms of non-alienating labour.
- (P2) Philosophy that aims at changing the world and recognizes social and political relations as its proper subject contributes to the achievement of the conditions of human flourishing.
- (∴) The proper role of philosophy is to change the world through taking a certain non-speculative form, and by relating to social reality in the appropriate critical mode.

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 74

¹⁷ *ibid.* p. 74

¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 76

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 77

Marx's two theses on the purpose of philosophy rest on normative foundations. His understanding of philosophy complies with the categorical 'imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being.' Because we care about human flourishing as described by Marx's philosophical anthropology, philosophy ought to change the world so as to achieve this state of flourishing. And because the conditions for flourishing are constituted by social and political relations, philosophy has to be concerned with these.

9. Conclusion

The *IC* is a powerful but elusive work. Careful reconstruction yields that the question 'What is the purpose of philosophy?' underlies the treatment of apparently unrelated subject matters. In answering this question, Marx advances a twofold claim:

(T1): The proper role of philosophy is to change the world.

(T2): Philosophy can only change the world by taking a non-speculative form and choosing specific social objects of inquiry.

In considering different arguments to support his claim, I have rejected strategies relying on Hegelian metaphysics or fancy versions of historical materialism. Instead, I believe that Marx's position is best supported by normative arguments. And I suspect that something similar is true with regards to the question of 'How to justify socialism?'

References

MARX, KARL, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: Prometheus Books, 1988).

---, 'Towards a Critique of Hegel's philosophy of right: Introduction', in David McLellan (ed.), *Karl Marx Selected Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).