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Practices of Truth in Philosophy

This volume provides a geographically and historically diverse overview of philosophical traditions that establish a deep connection between truth and practice, or even see truth itself as a kind of practice.

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Practices of Truth in Philosophy will appeal to scholars and advanced students interested in the history of philosophy, comparative philosophy, ethics, epistemology, and the metaphysics of truth.

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Rejecting a New Myth of the Given

Sabina Vaccarino Bremner

8.1

Karl Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (TF) has long been taken as a schematic program for materialist theory, concluding with the notorious final thesis: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it" (TF 11; 5:5). Yet the meaning of "these eleven deceptively transparent theses," despite being "only a few sentences long," as Louis Althusser claims, has long been less than clear.[1] Given the *Theses*' mysterious nature, one of the primary meanings interpolated into them has been an attack on 'mechanical materialism.'[2] Against a deterministic or fatalistic ('mechanical') construal of materialism which would reduce human behavior to the material *determinants* of their behavior, Marx's main point in the *Theses* is taken to exhort his reader toward *activity*, where 'activity' is associated with material, concrete practice in the world (Balibar 1994: 13).

Interestingly, however, in the *Theses*, Marx never uses the term 'mechanical materialism,' *mechanisches Materialismus*; the term can only be found employed by Friedrich Engels in a text published after Marx's death, more than 40 years after the composition of the *Theses* (1886; 26:370). There, Engels rejects mechanical materialism as treating human subjects as mere objects of scientific investigation, affected only from without rather than as potentially changeable and free beings. Instead, in the *Theses*, Marx uses another phrase to disparage the brand of materialism he rejects, once again attributed to Feuerbach. He refers to *anschauendes Materialismus*, which in English has unfortunately been translated as 'contemplative materialism,' the obscurity of this phrase perhaps encouraging the conflation with 'mechanical materialism.' Instead, in what follows, I suggest that Marx is rejecting an *intuitional* or *intuitive* materialism, a materialism that acknowledges only passive affection by "sense objects" rather than recognizing that sensing constitutes an "*activity*" (TF 19; 5:3, 5:5).

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Thus, in my view, something has been missed in the course of translation. I take seriously the early Marx's attack on *intuitional* materialism rather than mechanical materialism, and investigate the force a conception of sensibility as activity has for his conception of materialism. Doing so, I suggest, entails interesting and important implications for Marx's philosophy of mind, a topic which, in the wake of certain trends in the twentieth-century reception of Marx, has been neglected. Indeed, it allows for a reading of Marx's materialism as a continuation or extension of certain formulations of idealism (here, I emphasize Kantian transcendental idealism). In so doing, my reading can help to shed light on a problem for contemporary materialism articulated by Stuart Hall:

> The materialism of Marxism cannot rest on the claim that it abolishes the mental character—let alone the real effects—of mental events (i.e., thought), for that is, precisely, the error of what Marx called a one-sided or mechanical materialism (in the *Theses on Feuerbach*).
>
> (1985: 100)

Yet Marx's framing of materialism as deriving its force from sensibility as an *active* faculty rather than (as it is generally conceived) as a merely passive receptivity does not leave contemporary understandings of idealism unchanged, either. A prominent strand of interpretation has read the post-Kantian tradition as united in rejecting the "myth of the given," or rejecting the view of the cognizing mind as affected immediately by sense impressions independent of the conceptual operations of the understanding (Sellars 1956, Brandom 1994, McDowell 1994, Kukla 2002, Rödl 2007). I claim that construing the rejection of the myth of the given in this manner corresponds to the idealism Marx criticizes in the *Theses*, insofar as it identifies cognitive activity as the sole purview of the understanding on the one hand, and attributes cognitive passivity solely to sensibility or empirical receptivity on the other. Instead, I take Marx to associate materialism in part with the rejection of this dichotomy between the apparently 'higher' and 'lower' faculties; I claim that he, like Kant, points to reflection on organic *life* as a potential way out of this dichotomy. Thus, my interpretation does, in the end, lead us back to Engels' later critique of mechanical materialism, but, as we will see, conceived differently than many of Marx's interpreters would have it.

8.2

In the context of the *Theses*, Marx associates *anschauendes Materialismus* with a failure to notice what he calls "sensory" or "sensible human activity

[*sinnlich menschlische Tätigkeit*]" or "sensibility … as a practical activity [*Sinnlichkeit … als praktische Tätigkeit*]" (TF 1, TF 9;5:3, 5:5). This claim, much like *anschauendes Materialismus*, has been translated, somewhat unfortunately, as "sensuous human activity" and "sensuousness … as a practical activity."[3] As a result of the loss of the connection in translation to 'intuition' [*Anschauung*] on the one hand, and to 'sensibility' [*Sinnlichkeit*] on the other, an important connection to the history of philosophy, too, has been lost. As I show in this section, the translation of *sensuousness* corresponds to only *one* of the senses Marx attributes to *Sinnlichkeit*; the first, and primary, sense can be captured only by referring to 'sensibility.'

On Kant's conception of sensibility, "intuition [*Anschauung*] … takes place only insofar as the object is given to us, but this in turn, is possible only if it affects the mind in a certain way"; the "capacity (receptivity) to acquire representations through the way in which we are affected by objects is called sensibility [*Sinnlichkeit*]" (A19/B33). Sensibility, then, just is our receptivity to objects of intuition, our mind's capacity to be affected by things outside us. Through sensibility, "objects are *given* to us"—indeed, "there is no other way in which objects can be given to us"; yet objects "are *thought* through the understanding," from which "arise concepts" (A19/B33). The sensible content of our cognitive representations, the sense impressions of objects insofar as they affect sensibility, Kant terms "matter [*Materie*]" (A20/B34). Matter, as the apparently direct or brute impingement of sense impressions or sense data on our receptive faculty, is distinguished from the "form" of the appearance, as what allows the manifold "to be intuited as ordered in certain relations," the latter of which Kant will later attribute to space and time (A20/B34).

Marx begins the *Theses* by taking up and revising certain aspects of this Kantian model of sensibility and intuition. He claims that "the chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism—that of Feuerbach included—is that the thing, reality, sensibility, is conceived only in the form of the object or of intuition, but not as sensory human activity, practice; not on the side of the subject" (TF 1; 5:3). In this passage, Marx rejects a materialism on which sensibility is understood as an inert object or item in the brain, a merely "receptive organ," as Lukács would later write (1923: 130) and where the object of intuition—the sensed object, the empirical datum—is taken to stand apart from the human subject, as if it can be considered independently of sensibility's contribution in presenting it in consciousness. Instead, Marx claims, the sensed object cannot be given independently of the *activity of sensing*, which in turn constitutes a 'practice.' Indeed, Marx continues, "in contradistinction to materialism"—that is, materialism in the vein of Feuerbach—this "*active* side was developed abstractly by idealism—which, of course, does not know real,

sensing activity as such" (TF 1; 5:3). What materialism is missing, in other words, is a crucial insight from *idealism*: that experience is not given, but must be mediated by the activity of cognition in order to be intelligible at all.

In Kant's conception of transcendental idealism, what does the work of this mediation, of the contribution of cognition into experience, is, on many interpretations, not sensibility, but understanding. Thus, Kant claims in the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "The same function that gives unity to the different representations *in a judgment* also gives unity to the mere synthesis of different representations *in an intuition*, which, expressed generally, is called the pure concept of understanding" (A79/B104). It is the understanding through its categories that ultimately synthesizes concepts into judgments *as well as* intuitions into unified representations. In the Transcendental Deduction, Kant seems to reiterate the idea that synthesis or combination, and with it all cognitive form or unity, is the sole purview of the understanding: "All combination, whether we are conscious of it or not, whether it is a combination of the manifold of intuition or of several concepts … is an action of the understanding," since "the combination … of a manifold in general can never come to us through the senses" (B129–130). Insofar as sensibility is just another term for "receptivity," its function restricted only to being "affected by objects" (A26/B42, A19/B33), Kant seems to give to sensibility the sense of a certain *passivity* of cognition in comparison with the understanding.

This presents considerable conundrums for Kant's conception of self-consciousness, which is divided between its empirical and intellectual aspects: since our "intuition" is not "mere self-activity, i.e., intellectual," and "sensibility" refers only to the manner in which perceptions are "given in the mind *without* spontaneity," we can know ourselves as subjects only "as appearance," akin to empirical things (B68, my emphasis). While we are also aware of ourselves to be spontaneous, active, thinking subjects, such awareness, for risk of falling into paralogism, can never amount to knowledge. The passivity of sensibility thus presents the challenge, one which German Idealists would later reject as insurmountable, of reconciling these divided aspects of our self-cognition.[4]

Nevertheless, sensibility is also a *Vermögen*—which has the sense not only of cognitive 'faculty,' but also 'capacity' or 'capability,' and thus 'activity'—one which also has its *own* forms, namely space and time, by which it, too, makes a structuring contribution to the presentation of experience. Thus, Kant leaves significant ambiguity as to the extent to which sensibility can be understood as *active* alongside understanding, and thereby, ultimately, not strictly passive after all.

We can take Marx to exploit this ambiguity by radically extending Kant's line of thought. Rather than attributing activity primarily to the

function of understanding, Marx attributes activity all the way down—even to the apparently brute affection of the subject by sense objects. It is in the failure to recognize that the activity of cognition extends down to the apparently mute reception of the manifold of intuition that the idealist "does not know real, sensing activity" as such (TF 1; 5:3). Thus, Marx claims that experience is not to be conceived in terms of passive copying of empirical givens, but as the product of the active work of mediation.

Recent discussions in the scholarship parse Kant's ambiguity on this point in terms of his position on nonconceptual content, or the extent to which sensibility makes its own independent contribution to cognition in abstraction from conceptual unification or the activity of understanding.[5] On one prominent line, Kant's conception of the mediation of cognition has been understood strictly in terms of *conceptual* mediation or *rational* spontaneity: the idea that, as Kukla puts it, "the objects of perception cannot be mute sense data or raw particulars," because "we can see nothing if we have not developed a space of concepts that would let us make sense of what we see" (2002: 335, 324). Kant's influence on the history of philosophy, it has been claimed, thus consists in the rejection of the Myth of the Given, as the idea that no intelligible distinction can be drawn between sense data given to conscious awareness and those cognitive processes by which this data is taken up and conceptualized (Sellars 1956, Brandom 1994, McDowell 1994).[6] On such a view, the post-Kantian tradition is unified by the broad agreement that there is no 'given,' and this is because the particulars of perception are already conceptually mediated and propositionally structured. Governed by concepts as semantic rules, the perceptual features or sense impressions impinging on sensibility are thus never given as such, but already normative.

Yet in claiming that the given is a myth, such a picture reinstates yet another distinction which Marx in the *Theses* explicitly rejects: namely, the dichotomy between sensibility as passive and understanding as active. As McDowell puts it, "experience is passive," but "draws into operation capacities that genuinely belong to spontaneity" (1994: 13). In other words, to the extent that there is any active contribution of sensibility at all, McDowell attributes this activity to *understanding* as spontaneity, such that sensibility remains strictly passive (and indeed, has no isolable role at all): "Experiences have their content by virtue of the fact that conceptual capacities are operative in them, and that means capacities that genuinely belong to the understanding" (McDowell 1994: 66). Indeed, McDowell argues that we can avoid "falling into idealism" and "slighting the independence of reality" only by recognizing "the experiencing subject [as] passive, acted on by independent reality"—only by *retaining* a distinction between passive sensibility and active understanding or spontaneity (1994: 34, 67).[7]

Marx's *Theses* have been understood in a similar vein. As Rödl interprets them, the prior materialisms Marx rejects conceive of "material reality exclusively as an object of intuition, or as to be known receptively" (2007: 122). Rödl writes that on the alternative Marx endorses, by contrast, "true materialism reveals spontaneity and its knowledge to be of, and thus to be, a material reality"; thus, it "conceives of material reality not merely as an object of intuition, but as spontaneity" (Rödl 2007: 122, 128). Here, once more, the activity of sensibility is reduced to *spontaneity*—in particular, the materiality of "first person knowledge, which is nonreceptive, nonempirical" (Rödl 2007: 14)—the activity only of the 'higher faculties' of understanding or reason rather than the 'lower faculty' of sensing.

Yet Marx does not emphasize the materiality of understanding; instead, Marx expressly draws attention to a conception of *sensibility* as active, and hence not limited to merely presenting empirical 'givens'.[8] His primary critique of the idealists in the *Theses* is that they have developed the role of "activity" only "abstractly"—that is, at the level of discursivity (concepts or understanding), which is general and 'abstract' insofar as it is at a remove from (particular, concrete) intuitions and the senses (TF 1; 5:3).[9] Marx claims, further, that what idealists have so far failed to acknowledge is not the materiality of self-knowledge, but "*sensing* activity [*sinnliche Tätigkeit*]" (TF 1; 5:3, my emphasis). Thus, rather than restricting cognitive activity to understanding (or to reason), I read Marx as putting pressure on the very way in which this distinction is carved up—the identification of activity with understanding on the one hand, and passivity with sensibility or empirical affection on the other.

Indeed, Marx claims that it is only insofar as an active, free role for sensibility is retained that human beings can exist in an unalienated relationship to the external world:

> For the starving man, it is not the human form of food that exists, but only its abstract existence as food. It could just as well be there in its crudest form, and it would be impossible to say wherein this feeding activity differs from that of animals.
>
> (3:302)

That is, the alienated subject can notice 'food' only on the discursive, not the sensible, level: only as an abstraction. Thus, she can make no distinction between food 'in its crudest form' and food in its 'human' form: no distinction, that is, in the sensible particularity of its form, at a level of discernment finer than that which can be carved up by concepts. For Marx, this capacity for sensible discernment shows up as an *aesthetic* capacity: "The care-burdened, poverty-stricken man has no sense for the finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty

and the specific character of the mineral: he has no mineralogical sense" (3:302). The alienated subject can only cognize concepts ('commercial value'), and thus cannot discern distinctions among particular intuitions ('the beauty and the specific character' of a given mineral; 'the finest play').[10]

Thus, the activity of sensibility as sense perception manifests itself among alienated and unalienated subjects as a difference in strictly *sensory* capacity. Marx writes, "Just as only music awakens in man the sense of music, and just as the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear … the senses of the social man differ from those of the non-social man" (3:301).[11] Marx specifies this by claiming that "the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man)," or "the five senses but also the so-called mental senses, the practical senses (will, love, etc.), in a word, human sense," all call for cultivation as part and parcel of the cultivation of species-being (3:301). Marx insists, in other words, on sensibility's independence from understanding, which he takes to be expressed by sensibility's active attunement to aesthetic richness as a capacity that must be separable from determination by abstract and generalized concepts.

If Marx is read as rejecting the passivity of sensing in the way I have been urging, we might think that this commits him to a form of full-blown idealism—or, as McDowell puts it, to "the spectre of frictionless spinning, which deprives us of anything recognizable as empirical content" (1994: 18). Instead, Marx takes the recognition of sensibility as an active power of the mind to entail a *rejection* of idealism, in that it enables us to overcome the view that the "thing," outer sense, is to be understood "only as object or as appearance," instead acknowledging it as the product of "practical, human-sensible activity," as "praxis, on the side of the subject" (TF 1, 5, 1, 1845; 5:3-4). The importance of "real, sensing activity" is just the point Marx claims idealists have missed: while they have grasped the role of activity "abstractly"—much as Sellars and his followers acknowledge the activity of the abstract conceptual capacities to be operative in sensibility—they have missed the role of genuinely "*concrete* activity," and have thereby collapsed "sense objects" into "thought objects" (TF 1; 5:3). In holding that the object of sense is not inertly given but is shaped by the structuring activity of the mind, Marx understands this claim to be consistent, *pace* McDowell, with a *rejection* of idealism: consistent, in other words, with materialism.

Marx, then, rejects the myth of the given, while also rejecting the usual strategy for overcoming the myth. That is, Marx rejects both empiricism ('intuitional materialism')—the view that knowledge is formed on the basis of sense content given to us without cognitive mediation—and idealism, as the view that such cognitive activity is wholly reducible to the

conceptual operations of understanding at work even in the receptivity of sensibility.[12] Thus, Marx's response to the myth of the given comes by way of expanding the domain of cognitive mediation to more explicitly encompass sensibility. In doing so, Marx does not take his account of sensibility to amount to a 'frictionless spinning,' but to be a way of acknowledging the objectivity of empirical content—a presupposition of *materialism*, not idealism. How can this be the case?

8.3

To answer this question, we must examine a second sense Marx posits of 'sensing activity.' In the *German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels claim that Feuerbach

> does not see how the sensible world around him is not a thing given directly from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and, indeed, in the sense that it is a historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its commerce, modifying its social system according to the changed needs.
>
> (5:39)

Thus, 'sensing activity' admits of another meaning than the one I considered earlier—namely, experience, the objects of sense, are shaped by our collective practices, as concrete (sensible) activity in the material world. For instance,

> the cherry tree, like almost all fruit trees, was, as is well known, only a few centuries ago transplanted by commerce into our zone, and therefore only by this action of a definite society in a definite age has it become 'sense certainty' for Feuerbach.
>
> (1846; 5:39)

Thus, Marx suggests that the 'given' is a myth not merely in that it is shaped by the activity of the conceptual operations of the mind, but also in that it is shaped by human practice over the course of history and culture. Where the cherry tree *appears* as a brute object of intuition or mere empirical given, Marx and Engels claim that it can only take this form as the result of a long process of human intervention into the workings of nature. Even an apparently neutral, inert, and passively presented empirical datum, like a cherry tree, is *already* socially shaped by concrete human activity: what we take up in intuition is, in this now precisified sense, the product of sensible activity.

Thus, the first meaning of 'sensory activity' Marx recognizes picks out the activity of sensibility as faculty of sensing against a picture of the sensory apparatus as passive, mere receptivity; the second refers to the activity of human beings in *making* objects of outer sense as the domain of material, social practice. In both cases, the manifold of intuition is shaped by human activity: the first in consciousness, the second in embodied action. Where for Kant, the mediating work of sensibility consisted in the contribution of the spatiotemporal forms of intuition, for Marx, these structuring forms of experience are themselves empirically and historically constituted—hence, as he elaborates later in *Capital* (1867, 1894), the emphasis on distortions of time under capitalism ('circulation time,' 'surplus labor-time,' 'time-wages'). In other words, both Kant and Marx agree that sensibility supplies its own form(s), yet Marx claims that *this form is made in experience*, and thus—in some sense—made *in sensibility itself*, rather than, as Kant holds, an a priori operation of cognition *prior to* experience. The empirical is thus not given, but made; insofar as we make the empirical, social world, our sensibility is, to that extent, an active faculty.

In relating the making of the empirical world to sensibility as an active faculty, Marx thus recognizes a capacity for free agency distinct from *moral* agency. For Kant, the human faculty of choice [*Willkür*] can only be free in the positive sense if determined by practical reason (thus by the higher faculties), and thus only if moral. Yet the faculty of choice is also 'impure' for Kant in that it is inevitably also influenced by sensibility, even when determined by practical reason:

> That faculty of choice which can be determined by *pure reason* is called the free faculty of choice. … The human faculty of choice, however, is a faculty that can indeed be *affected* but not *determined* by [sensible] impulses, and is therefore of itself (apart from an acquired aptitude of reason) not pure but can still be determined to actions by pure will. (6:213)

On Kant's view, freedom and activity in the practical domain are fully expressed only through the spontaneity of reason, while sensibility remains passive, as what is merely affected by 'impulses.' Nevertheless, Kant characterizes the "faculty of desire", equated with the "will", also in terms of an actively technical capacity to bring about the object represented by one's idea of an end (5:220). Kant later defines the products of this capacity as "work [*Werk*]", or "art in general", including the fine arts associated with genius that he goes on to discuss (5:303). Kant goes on to qualify that production in this sense can also be free: "By right, only production through freedom, i.e., through a faculty of choice [*Willkür*] that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art" (5:303). Thus, Kant comes to associate aesthetic production, as a higher instance of production ('work'

or labor) in general, as the product of both reason as well as sensitivity to aesthetic particulars that cannot be articulated in determinate concepts. Kant later calls these aesthetic representations 'aesthetic ideas', or representations of imagination which "no language fully attains or can make intelligible" (5:314), and, while Kant is not at all consistent on his characterization of imagination, he sometimes construes it in terms of sensibility (e.g., 5:354)—hence, a *free* sensibility. Some instances of production count as 'free' on Kant's account in being not only reason-guided, but also responsive to empirical particularity. Indeed, Kant coins a new term, heautonomy, to characterize their distinct mode of autonomy that guides responsiveness to empirical features in the absence of direction by understanding or by determinate concepts (5:186). Kant thus stresses, importantly prefiguring aspects of Marx's account of unalienated labor, that the agent must be able to be "his own master", which includes having a "skill" or "art... to support himself" in such a way that he can work for himself in a free and independent relation to the object he produces (8:295; see Herman 2007: 150-3).[13]

While an emergent view of free sensibility can thus already be discerned in Kant's account of aesthetic production as practical purposiveness, it is made consistent only in Marx's early writings on unalienation.

By insisting on an account of sensibility as *active*, Marx can fully allows for a more capacious picture of human agency than Kant: one on which freedom does not find its source in motivation by a supersensible, non-natural order of causality, but through one's sensitivity to the empirical order of nature. Thus, "the sensible outburst of my life activity is *passion*, which thus becomes here the activity of my being" (3:304).

Thus, Marx calls for the marriage of a crucial materialist insight with a crucial idealist insight. The materialist insight consists in the recognition of the importance of sensibility, of *reality*, as against *thought* or understanding: human beings not as disembodied minds, but as shaped by historical, social, empirical circumstances and engaged in concrete shared practices. The idealist insight acknowledges that consciousness as such, and with it experience (through the work of sensibility), is an *activity*.

These two conceptions, of sensibility as activity and the activity of concrete embodied labor, are not as distinct as they may initially seem. They are related by the notion of *life*, by which, as has often gone unnoticed,[14] Marx and Engels generally qualify their conception of material processes.[15] Thus, in the *German Ideology* Marx and Engels claim that "the existence of men is their actual life-process" and often refer not to the *material determination* of consciousness, but to "life" as what "determines consciousness" (5:37). Many of their references are thus not to determination by 'material processes,' but to the "real," "material," "physical," "historical," or "active" "*life*-process"; not to 'material production,' but to "the

production of material *life*" or to the "material conditions of *life*" (1846; 5:36, 93, 54, 479). Indeed, they refer regularly to "life" as such, where "life involves before everything else eating and drinking, housing, clothing and various other things" (1846; 5:41–42). While for Marx and Engels, "the 'mind' is from the outset afflicted with the curse of being 'burdened' with matter," matter is not to be understood as brute or passive, but "makes its appearance in the form of agitated layers of air, sounds, in short, of language" (5:44). Matter, too, is conceived as embodied human activity, in particular the activity of communicating one's inmost thoughts; it is thus continuous with, not opposed to, consciousness. Marx and Engels appeal once more to the idea of human activity, now the 'active life-process,' as a way of bypassing both empiricism and idealism: "As soon as this active life-process is described, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts, as it is with the empiricists (themselves still abstract), or an imagined activity of imagined subjects, as with the idealists" (5:37). Thus, the "world of sense" is not a collection of sense objects, but constitutes "the total living sensible activity of the individuals composing it" (5:41).

The means of production thus constitutes an *organic* process, not a mechanical one. In the 1844 *Manuscripts*, Marx refers to labor as "life-activity" and as "productive life," yet material practice, as 'life-activity,' is cast in turn as continuous with consciousness: "man … has conscious life-activity" (3:276). The material and the mental are therefore conceived as of a piece with one another, rather than existing in opposition. The emphasis on 'life' as integral to consciousness brings out another dimension of Marx's relation to Kant. A Brandom has noted, the "self that is identified with [Kant's] synthetic unity of apperception is not happily thought of using the traditional category of substance. It is the moving, living constellation of its 'affections', that is, of the concomitant commitments that compose and articulate it" (2009: 41). Selves are not substances on the Kantian view because self-unity is the product of a "synthetic-integrative *activity*"; yet they are not pure spontaneity either, because they are a "moving, living constellation" of "affections," shaped both empirically as well as by the activity of their own thought (ibid.). Marx thus establishes a new branch of taking up Kantianism: not the Sellarsian or idealist line of identifying cognitive activity with conceptuality and the higher faculties of understanding and reason, but a new line that elevates Kantian sensibility to a status higher than that of a lower, inert faculty associated with animalistic instinct and brute sense impressions. As such, Marx further develops a line of thought that, as we've begun to see, Kant begins to articulate himself in his account of aesthetic and organic experience in the Critique of Judgment.

Indeed, for Marx it is because the activity of consciousness enables self-reflection on what one is doing that the material processes of laboring

activity can, when unalienated, count as free. Marx writes that "conscious life-activity directly distinguishes man from animal life-activity" because it is through consciousness that "his own life can be an object for him" and "his activity free activity" (3:276). Unestranged labor thus consists in "free, conscious activity," in which the productive activity of labor is integrated into the activity of consciousness, as mediated through the sensory reception of what one is empirically producing (3:276).

Thus, Marx diagnoses the opposition between materialism and idealism—an objectified, deterministic, brute materialism on the one hand, and an idealism that solipsistically takes current economic conditions to be a projection of one's own mind on the other—as a symptom of widespread alienation under capitalism.[16] In conditions of alienation, labor no longer appears as one's own activity, but as "external," "not one's own, but someone else's"; the "product of labor" thus appears only as "an alien object exercising power over [one]" (3:275). The "more the worker exerts himself, the more powerful becomes the alien world of objects which he creates over and against himself, the poorer he himself—his inner world—becomes" (3:272). Under conditions of alienation, the external world no longer appears to be the product of human activity, and thus as the potential target of *change*, but as an 'alien world of objects,' while human subjects are not animated by rich 'inner worlds' and 'free, conscious activity,' but determined mechanistically by brute causal forces. Counterintuitively, this distorted picture aligns not only with the viewpoint of crude materialism but also that of naive idealism, insofar as the latter takes the inner realm of the mental to be unaffected by external, empirical circumstances (thus appearing as an "alien world of objects"). Thus, in the idealism of the Young Hegelians, human beings' "relations" are mere "products of their brains [which] have got out of their hands," "chimeras, … ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away" (5:23). Human beings, Marx claims, are not objects or automata, as under brute materialism, but nor are they disembodied minds, as entailed by naive idealism. If Marx and Engels reject the apparent opposition between materialism and idealism—and with it the division between mind and matter—as a mere byproduct of capitalist alienation, they advocate a materialism in its place which *integrates* the empirical and the ideal, the sensible and the conceptual, the mental and the material.

Kant could, on one characterization, only make sense of the dichotomy between active spontaneity, as operative in discursivity, and passive sensibility, as the mute reception of empirical content, by relegating the former to the noumenal realm, and thus altogether outside of nature as the empirical domain of human life and activity. For instance, Kant claims that in the proposition 'I think,' "there is already no longer merely spontaneity of thinking, but also receptivity of intuition," by which "the thinking self must now … not merely indicate itself as object in itself through the 'I,' but

also determine its kind of existence, i.e., cognize it as noumenon; which, however, is impossible" (B430). Because the spontaneity of reason, as evidenced in the representation 'I think,' constitutes "pure self-activity" that "goes far beyond anything that sensibility can ever afford him," the self-conscious rational being "must view itself as an intelligence," "as belonging not to the world of sense, but to that of understanding" (4:452). Thus, John McDowell notes that Kant's "isolable contribution from receptivity" requires him to posit a distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal domains, a commitment that can only appear questionable by the lights of contemporary philosophy: for Kant, "receptivity figures as a susceptibility to the impact of a supersensible reality, a reality that is supposed to be independent of our conceptual activity in a stronger sense than any that fits the ordinary empirical world" (1994: 42). How, McDowell asks, "can the empirical world be genuinely independent of us, if we are partly responsible for its fundamental structure?" (1994: 42). On this basis, he attributes 'responsibility' for the 'structure' of the mental only to understanding and rejects an 'isolable contribution' from sensibility, which he takes to be sufficient, in turn, for rejecting any commitment to the noumenal.

In Marx's formulation of materialism, the particular given in perception, such as the cherry tree, is not 'given' not only in that our reception of it is dependent on the discursive or conceptual scheme into which we accommodate it but also in that it is shaped by its genealogy, the object's role throughout human history and culture. Marx would thus take issue with the Sellarsian position which holds that the manifold of intuition is 'not given' only in the sense that it is conceptually mediated, as well as to think that the only way sensibility can be separable from understanding is insofar as it passively receives brute sense impressions as 'empirical data' or 'sensory input' independent of discursive conditions. Against the first, Marx insists that the object of intuition itself *is made*; the second presupposition, Marx suggests, is tantamount to denying the possibility of aesthetic experience, and with it, unalienated experience.

8.4

The conception of 'life' allows us to understand how Marx's materialism can constitute a genuine alternative to mechanical materialism, even if Marx and Engels did not yet understand it under that moniker. Here, we can return to Engels' later remarks on mechanical materialism, having properly situated them in their appropriate context. In 1886, after Marx's death, Engels writes,

> The materialism of the last century was predominantly mechanical, because at that time, of all natural sciences, only mechanics, and indeed

> only the mechanics of solid bodies—celestial and terrestrial—in short, the mechanics of gravity, had come to any definite close. Chemistry at that time existed only in its infantile, phlogistic form. Biology still lay in swaddling clothes; vegetable and animal organisms had been only roughly examined and were explained by purely mechanical causes. What the animal was to Descartes, man was to the materialists of the 18th century—a machine. This exclusive application of the standards of mechanics to processes of a chemical and organic nature—in which processes the laws of mechanics are, indeed, also valid, but are pushed into the backgrounds by other, higher laws—constitutes the first specific but at that time inevitable limitations of classical French materialism.
>
> (26:370)

Here, Engels attributes the materialism of Feuerbach and his ilk to an incomplete understanding of nature, due, in turn, to an incomplete development of the natural sciences. Because the natural sciences were limited to principles of classical mechanics—which could only accommodate physics, relegating the more complex disciplines of chemistry and biology outside the domain of the sciences altogether—organic objects of nature, including human beings, could only be understood in mechanical terms, as brutely determined 'machines.' Against such a picture, Engels claims that scientific developments in the nineteenth century have made it possible to understand natural processes by pushing the 'laws of mechanics' into the background' 'by other, *higher* laws' such that 'vegetable and animal organisms' could be understood in the dynamic terms of *life* rather than as the products of 'purely mechanical causes': first, as teleology, but ultimately also in terms of natural selection. Thus, in his eulogy for Marx, Engels would liken Marx to Darwin, Darwin as discoverer of "the law of development of organic nature upon our planet," Marx as "discoverer of the fundamental law according to which human history moves and develops itself" (24:463).

In his recognition of organic principles as constitutive of 'other, higher laws' than the merely mechanical, I think it is important to note that Engels is advancing a different view of the historical shift from teleology to natural selection than how it is generally construed.[17] Many have understood the advent of Darwinian natural selection to be an *extension* of mechanical explanation to the realm of biological life, allowing for various, non-vitalist or physically reductionist views of the unity of the sciences.[18] Thus, far from positing an irreducible level of teleological explanation, biological phenomena are taken to be continuous with mechanical cause-and-effect relations. To the contrary, Engels claims that science had to develop modes of explanation more sophisticated than the 'exclusive application of the standards of mechanics to processes of a chemical and organic nature' in

order to encompass biology and chemistry as full-blooded sciences,[19] dovetailing with arguments to the effect that Darwinian natural selection retains an irreducible role for non-mechanical, *purposive*, explanation (Ginsborg 2004, Breitenbach 2009). To account for nature as a domain of *life* rather than as a collection of deterministically affected objects—as dynamic, not mechanical—called for a *reorientation* of cognition in the course of the history of science. Indeed, rather than merely extending mechanical explanation to organisms, we can already see Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* as reaching beyond the language of mechanism in order to encompass the more complex natural phenomena. Engels claims that this greater sophistication in scientific explanation ultimately allows for a more sophisticated formulation of materialism.[20]

Engels' rejection of mechanical materialism thus recalls Kant's conception of biological organisms as conceivable only by supplementing mechanical explanation with the concept of a purpose or end as a "heuristic principle," "even though this principle does not make the way in which these products have originated more comprehensible" and "we would want to make no use of it for explaining nature itself" (5:411). In other words, our reception into the consciousness of the empirical particular (the organism) is an *active* process, one by which the normativity of thinking can be reoriented by integrating *new* principles, ones enabling us to make sense of the particular thing, the object of intuition, anew. Kant thus suggests a conception of science on which cognition must be reflexively reoriented in order to incorporate new empirical phenomena, presupposing that empirical particulars can *challenge* the conceptual schemes afforded by the understanding. Kantian reflection on natural organisms thus confronts us with the recognition that consciousness cannot consist either in the brute imposition of the mental and its fixed schemes on the material world or in the passive reception of the mechanical causation of matter. But this presupposes, first, that we take in particulars *as* particulars, as calling for potentially new concepts or principles, rather than as already discursively determined from the outset (Arendt 1970: 15). It calls on a way of judging experience that arises for cases in which "only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found" (5:179).

In the third *Critique*, Kant attributes the "constitutive principles a priori" for "feeling" to the power of judgment (5:196). As we began to see above, Kant thus advances an account of aesthetics that presupposes a conception of sensibility that is determinable independently of the conceptual operations of the understanding. We might extend Kant's point, in other words, by saying that the process of "finding the general for the particular" rather than "merely … subsuming the particular under the general (whose concept is given)"[21] calls on the *activity* of sensibility, a faculty which, in such cases, can no longer be strictly subordinated to the

understanding (20:209). Kant, of course, ultimately attributes activity to reflective judgment, not sensibility; nevertheless, Kant also accords a crucial role to the free play of imagination, sometimes construed, as discussed above, in terms of sensibility (e.g., 5:354).

Thus, a Lukács noticed, the revolutionary "attitude … possesses a very real and concrete field of activity where it may be brought to fruition, namely *art*," as evidenced by the theoretical and practical role "Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* assigned to the principle of art [as] mediator" in "perfecting [his] system" (1923: 137). It is by appeal to reflective judgment, here in its *aesthetic* expression that Lukács situates his conception of praxis: "If man is fully human 'only when he plays'… the contents of life … may be salvaged from the deadening effects of the mechanism of reification. But only in so far as these contents become aesthetic" (1923: 138). Marx famously makes a similar remark in the 1844 *Manuscripts*: in unalienated labor, "man forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty" (3:277), thus drawing a connection between the two senses of 'sensible activity' I have outlined so far—the *practical* (in the sense of Kant's 'practical purposiveness' or 'faculty of choice'), and the *sensory-perceptive* (what Kant would construe as the mind's affection by the manifold of intuition). Both, for Marx, as I pointed out in §II, are importantly aesthetic, as well as organic (expressions of 'life').

In the second *Thesis*, Marx writes, "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a *practical* question" (5:3). In understanding truth as non-isolable from practice, we interrogate the given not only as conceptually mediated, but as collectively *made*, leading us, in turn, to reflect on the current constitution of material reality, and with it, on the prospects for its alteration. We learn to see the "whole world of sense" as shaped by the "activity" of "labor and creation, [of] production," just as much as "our own perceptive faculty" is (5:40). But we can only learn this mode of seeing if we extend the domain of cognitive agency beyond the stretch of conceptual schemes to encompass that presentation of the manifold of intuition as more than mere conceptual content.[22]

Notes

1 "The short flashes of the *Theses on Feuerbach* strike every philosopher who encounters them with their light, but everyone knows that a flash blinds more than it illuminates" (Althusser 1965: 25, 28); "in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx is at pains to distinguish his materialism from that of previous materialists, but he tells us very little about what 'materialism' itself is supposed to be" (Wood 2004 [1981]: 165).

2 Raymond Williams and György Lukács claim, for instance, that Marx and Engels' program for materialism is framed in opposition to "the naive dualism

of 'mechanical materialism'" or "the mechanistic fatalism which was [its] normal concomitant" (Williams 1977: 59; Lukács 1967: xxv).

3 See also discussion in Labica (1987: 29–32).

4 See discussion in Vaccarino Bremner (2020).

5 See discussion in Heidemann (2014), Schulting (2016), McLear (2021).

6 This erasure of sensibility as a faculty in its own right also marks a tenet of the neo-Kantian tradition; see Ferrari (2012) for discussion.

7 Brandom, similarly, claims that Kant's conception of discursive activity can be elaborated on the basis of "an internal coherence to the line of thought about concepts, judging, hence apperception and understanding" that can be considered "in abstraction from … considerations concerning sensibility" (2009: 50–51). However, I return to another suggestion from him which I take to be more in keeping with Marx's view below.

8 Indeed, Rödl does mention, although does not emphasize, "acts of sensibility" and "powers of receptive knowledge" (2007: 17, 86), and thus does not share McDowell's view of the extended role of conceptuality in Kantian thought. Nevertheless, a conception of sensibility *as* its own kind of activity, one distinct from intellectual spontaneity, is not a main focus of his account.

9 As Kant had claimed, a "concept is never referred directly to an object," but is always mediated by intuition (A68/B93).

10 Compare Kant: "Even the botanist, who recognizes in it the reproductive organ of the plant, pays no attention to this natural end if he judges the flower by means of taste" (5:229). The botanist is alienated in some sense from the plant's particularity. I am indebted to John Callanan for this suggestion.

11 I am indebted to Christoph Schuringa for suggesting these passages.

12 "Marx's insistence on active sensibility can be fruitfully compared to Dreyfus' criticism of McDowell. Dreyfus draws on the existentialist phenomenological tradition to argue that the discursive conditions of experience McDowell stresses themselves presuppose "a primordial nonconceptual mode of coping on the basis of which the conceptual world makes sense", or an "absorption into [a] field of attractions and repulsions" that generate "solicitations to act" which are not "propositionally structure[d]" (Dreyfus 2013: 21-2; for McDowell's response, see McDowell 2013). This exchange brings out the extent to which Marx, while importantly prefiguring the phenomenologists' insistence on the nonconceptual, outlines a genuinely distinct third alternative between the phenomenological and transcendental idealist accounts. For Marx, we are not passively given over to attractions and repulsions on a 'primordial' level; an important marker of unalienation is instead being actively engaged in sensing, and thus also (in a connection I establish below) in actively making, the world of experience, which thus can have no primordial or primitive structure independent of its particular material determination at a given time. In this connection, it doesn't seem to me that McDowell's (2013) self-defense insulates him from the criticisms Marx lodges against the idealist tradition. I am indebted to Adrian Haddock for suggesting this comparison.

13 For more on Kant's account of production as art in general, see Vaccarino Bremner (2022b); for more on aesthetic ideas as non-discursive, see Vaccarino Bremner (2021). I am indebted to Tyler Re for discussions on the relations between Kant's account of practical purposiveness to Marx's account of labor.

14 Khurana's (2022) Hegelian reading of Marx's appeal to life provides one very helpful exception. I advance a Kantian reading of this appeal in the following section.

15 For more on this point, see Vaccarino Bremner and Canson (ms).
16 The solipsistic kind of idealism would seem to align with Marx and Engels' critique of Max Stirner, who posits that nothing outside of the self has any value since only is one's own interests exist; for further discussion of Stirner and the other Young Hegelians, see Whyman (2022).
17 Other passages in Engels (1886) suggest otherwise, and the text in general is contradictory in places. In part for this reason, I have cautioned against collapsing the conception of mechanical materialism advanced in this text to the view articulated in the *Theses* 40 years prior and have so far grounded Marx's materialism in the views of the early Marx and Engels.
18 See discussion in Millikan (1993), Friedman (2001: 126–129), and Zammito (2006).
19 By 'mechanism,' I have in mind Cartesian mechanism; Newtonianism is, on this view, already a progression beyond classical mechanics insofar as it posits new forces irreducible to early modern conceptions of causality (such as the seemingly occult commitment to action at a distance; see Janiak 2008).
20 Interestingly, Lukács makes the inverse point, arguing that historical processes of reification come to take the form of mechanical, abstract laws of nature, and the agent the guise of the passive, observing scientist: "All human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the objective forms of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature. And also, the subject of this 'action' likewise assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these—artificially abstract—processes, the attitude of the experimenter" (Lukács 1923: 131).
21 For discussion of how this process figures into Kant's account of organic life, see Vaccarino Bremner (2022).
22 The ideas for this chapter were developed in conversation with Chloé de Canson, and also inform our manuscript in progress (Vaccarino Bremner and Canson ms). I am indebted to her for occasioning this line of thought and for our ongoing dialogue on these topics, to Lorenzo Serini and Pietro Gori for their invaluable editorial assistance, to Christoph Schuringa for his sharp insights, to Frederick Neuhouser for first suggesting a connection between the 1844 *Manuscripts* and Kant's conception of practical purposiveness in a 2017 course on Marx, to Tyler Re for his own development of these issues and for our conversations on his own evolving work, and to discussions on Marx's views with Howard Caygill, Peter Osborne, Andrew Chitty, Karen Ng, Anton Ford, Thomas Khurana, Vanessa Wills, and John Rufo. I am also indebted to audience responses at the London Post-Kantian Seminar and the "Futures of Marx" conference hosted by the University of Potsdam and Berlin Center for Social Critique.

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