

Notes on Marx, Money and Commodities For Philosophy 166

In “The Power of Money in Bourgeois Society” section of the *1844 Manuscripts*, Karl Marx condemns money and envisages a society that transcends relations involving money. He says this society would be superior.

Money is just a conventional device that facilitates exchange. So Marx’s real target must be exchange, perhaps specifically the wide exchange of goods and services that occurs in a market economy. What’s wrong with market exchange? The text suggests various possibilities.

1. Marx writes, money involves “ the transformation of all human and natural properties into their contraries, the universal overturning and confounding of things: it makes brothers of impossibilities.” Further down on same page: “That which I am unable to do as a man, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able do by means of money. Money thus turns each of these powers into something which in itself it is not.—turns it, that is, into its *contrary*.” Same page: “Money is the alienated *ability of mankind*.”

In other words, the limits of my natural powers and capabilities are extended through exchange. Why is this bad? Some examples: I am ugly, but with money I am able to purchase sexual services, or perhaps even acquire what is sometimes called a “trophy wife [or husband]”. I am lame, but with money I can hire a taxi, or purchase crutches, and in this way the natural tendency of my lameness to impede my physical mobility is partly overcome.

No doubt it would be nice if I were not lame, but suppose my lameness is incurable. One might hold it is unequivocally better that via market exchange or otherwise I can purchase goods that will offset my physical bodily deficiencies and enhance my natural powers.

At the end of the passage, page 105, Marx writes, “Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one: then you can exchange love only for love, trust for trust, etc. If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person. . . . Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life.”

A clue that something might be wrong here emerges if we try to extend Marx’s list: in a decent society you can exchange barbering services only for barbering services, corn for corn, back rubs for back rubs. Why is simple reciprocal barter superior in any way to broader exchange, say of my back rubs for your corn or barbering services (or for money, which then enables me to purchase any of a wide variety of goods and services and extend my natural powers up to the limit of what my money will buy)?

Marx appears to be appealing to the idea of a natural aristocracy, in which people are born with better and worse traits, and nothing is done artificially to augment traits or equalize people’s capacities. Rather society is arranged so that those with a poor endowment of traits are enabled to do what they are equipped by nature to do without social aid—namely, not much. Society is also arranged so that those lucky enough to be born with very desirable traits (and to have them augmented by the “natural” good luck or bad luck of having parents or guardians who are willing and able to raise you so that your traits develop into talents and skills to a greater or lesser extent, as it may be) are enabled to do what they are equipped to do by nature without social aid. In this society those with a poor endowment of traits do worse and those with a better endowment of

traits do better. For example, people are born naturally able to run fast or slow, and social arrangements do not tamper with this natural distribution but just give people access to running tracks, so naturally fast and slow can race and the naturally fast will win. And the same holds for all traits. The society is a natural aristocracy. Rousseau at one point in the *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Part 2, suggests a similar ideal.

This ideal seems to belong to feudalism. Shakespeare exhibits loyalty to it in the passages Marx quotes. But why does Marx go along with this? One might think Marx should be the fierce enemy of sheer bad luck beyond one's power to control being the determiner of a person's prospects for living a good life. But whether one is a natural aristocrat depends largely on the good or bad luck or being born into a rich poor family, or of being born with a better or a worse natural endowment of proto-traits, or of having competent and dedicated or incompetent and lax parents. (Marx later abandons any loyalty to the natural aristocracy ideal; see the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, p. 530, toward the bottom of the page in the *Marx-Engels Reader*.)

2. Marx in some passages appears to object to unlimited market exchange—a society where everything and anything is for sale. P. 102: “By possessing the *property* of buying everything, by possessing the property of appropriating all objects, *money* is thus the *object* of eminent possession. The universality of its *property* is the omnipotence of its being.”

In the recommended reading, a chapter from *Spheres of Justice*, Michael Walzer takes up this suggestion. He suggests we in fact don't allow everything to be bought and sold: we prohibit some exchanges. He provides a list of blocked exchanges. The list is heterogeneous.

a. Some of these blocked exchanges seem to involve goods whose nature is such that they logically cannot be transferred, so the idea of transfer by sale makes no sense. “He who can buy bravery is brave, though a coward,” Marx writes (p.105). I am either brave or not, that depends on how I am disposed to behave in dangerous situations; I cannot purchase bravery. Perhaps there is a problem of fraudulent misrepresentation—I might buy a bravery medal and wear it as though I had earned it. The problem here is fraud not exchange. Also, love and friendship, as commonly understood, are not things that could be bought and sold—whatever one purchased, it could not be love or friendship, though conceivably could be the occasion that somehow triggers development of love or friendship. However, there is no point to forbidding what is impossible.

b. Some items on Walzer's list are goods such that we create for a purpose, which sale would subvert. If the idea of voting is to elicit citizen's conscientious judgments about where the common good lies and so what public policy choices to make, then selling votes subverts the point. (If you conceived of the vote as a resource to be used by each voter for her own advantage, and this was a reasonable view, then on that view vote selling would not seem to be problematic.)

c. Some items on Walzer's list are things that could be bought and sold and sometimes are bought and sold but, it is claimed, ought not to be bought and sold. Making the thing a commodity is morally inappropriate for some reason or degrades the value of the thing. This category includes uncontroversial entries such as human beings. The list could be extended to include controversial entries. Some people would favor, and some would oppose, making illegal the

sale of sexual services, the sale of bodily organs, the sale of the labor of childbearing as in commercial surrogacy, and so on.

d. We prohibit the sale of some items for paternalistic reasons. Those wielding state power believe that many of those who would purchase the good would be causing harm to themselves, so we should restrict people's liberty to purchase for their own good. Here even if sale is what is prohibited the real target is usually human use. Whatever paternalistic reasons we might have for prohibiting the sale of cocaine for recreational purposes would presumably also lead us to oppose the practice of free distribution of cocaine for recreational purposes by churches. Of course the claim that paternalistic restriction of individual liberty is morally desirable is controversial.

The line of thought leading to supporting some blocked exchanges supports regulating not abolishing market exchange.

3. Some of Marx's examples suggest that one of his concerns might be the undesirable bad consequences of market exchange starting from very unbalanced distribution of wealth. "He who can buy bravery is brave, though a coward" might be alluding to the purchase of armed guards or mercenary soldiers. Maybe it is unfortunate that some are so rich and some so poor that the rich can purchase the labor of impoverished brave fighters, though he is obviously not the right person to command their military labor. Marx bemoans the fact that the market responds only to effective demand—desires backed by dollars, so one who is apt for education but lacks money to pay will not gain an education but one who can pay for instructors will gain their services however unable he is to benefit from the teaching. If the problem here is maldistribution of wealth, the solution would seem to lie in the area of redistribution of wealth or institution of other types of measures that correct the maldistribution. The abolition of market exchange would not seem to be an appropriate remedy for this problem.

4. Perhaps Marx regards market exchange and the purchase of commodities as distracting us from other activities that would better promote our genuine fulfillment or self-realization (for Marx, self-realization involves the development and exercise of one's human powers and capabilities). I spend my time shopping at the mall when I could be painting or sculpting or writing poetry or music or devoting myself to athletic achievement.

It's hard to assess this concern. In order to achieve self-realization, we need stuff, and since there are many varieties of valuable self-realization, society requires that many kinds of stuff be available to people. No marble, no sculpture. No surfboards, no surfing. So we need shopping malls. Of course, one could regulate the market to encourage socially desired consumption and discourage patterns of consumption deemed undesirable. We could subsidize opera concerts and musical lessons and place a "sin" tax on action movies. But unless we went in for drastic restriction, people would still have wide freedom to shop for whatever they like whether or not most people in society approve of their purchases. Marx does not suggest he wants to go down this road—the road of drastic restriction--so what road is he suggesting?

I should add that I may be overinterpreting the passages or reading between the lines what is not there in the text. I am not sure the distraction issue really is one Marx means to raise. I include this possibility in the interest of trying to indicate all of the plausible reasons Marx might have for disparaging money and market exchange.

5. Marx clearly is bemoaning the image of a society in which each person's actions are overwhelmingly motivated by calculations of gain to herself. The institution of market exchange permits interaction on the basis of mutual self-interest. Via contract law and the enforcement of contract law the state makes the practice of market exchange easier to engage in with confidence that contracts will be kept. The existence of the practice of market exchange and the institutions supporting it widens the scope of possible market exchange and renders it more feasible and attractive for individuals to make mutually profitable deals. Marx may worry that market exchange does not merely permit economic cooperation to take place that is predominantly motivated by the self-interest of each participating agent but tends to cause people to become more self-interested, more selfish and piggy, than they would be if some other institutions and practices were in place organizing economic cooperation. Marx writes, "If money is the bond binding me to human life, binding society to me, binding me and nature and man, is not money the bond of all bonds? Can it not dissolve and bind all ties? Is it not, therefore, the universal agent of divorce? It is the true agent of divorce as well as the true binding agent—the [universal] galvano-chemical power of society" (p. 104). I'm not sure how to construe this. Marx might be suggesting that market exchange encourages people to become increasingly selfish and tends to bring about a social world in which individuals more and more are motivated only by narrow self-interest in their interactions. Then the galvano-chemical power of society is greed, but we could rearrange institutions, perhaps by abolishing market exchange, in ways that would increase our tendencies to amiability and sociability. In that superior social world the "galvano-chemical power of society" would be something like mutual good will not greed.

This is a complex issue. A simple point is that from the fact that in a market exchange, both parties benefit, you can't infer the ultimate motivation of the agents is self-interested or narrowly self-interested. One partner in trade might be planning to use her profit to contribute to global famine relief and the other trading partner might be planning to use her profit to contribute to a charity that will restore endangered old art works. Also, there is the large question, to what degree basic sources of human motivation are fixed in each individual by a biological endowment that will express itself pretty much in the same way in a wide variety of environments. One might see market exchange as a device for coping with human selfishness and channeling it to socially desirable outcomes rather than a significant cause of selfishness.

Again, the question arises, am I reading into this text concerns that are not in Marx's mind? I'm not sure. One reason for suspecting Marx does have this line of thought in mind is that if he were right in the claims I am attributing to him, that would plausibly support abolition not merely regulation of market exchange (if one had available some better alternative that would dampen aggregate selfishness). On one view, the prime legitimate function of the state is to supply important public goods to the members of society and ensure the fair distribution of the benefits and burdens of the scheme of provision of such goods. If tinkering with institutions could change the hearts and minds of men and women and make us less selfish, the aggregate decrease in selfishness might be regarded as a psychic public good, which the state ought to supply just as it supplies other important public goods such as a system of law and order and national defense. (The tricky point would be showing that abolition of market exchange would really be expected to generate the desired psychic public good and to do so at acceptable cost in terms of other values.)

Aside on Walzer. In the recommended reading (the subsection “What Money Can Buy”), Walzer raises the concern that if some people have too little money (too little command of resources with exchange value), they will lack the capability to be full functioning free and equal members of democratic society. He quotes a sociologist saying “Money buys membership in industrial society.” Walzer believes it is a moral imperative that we should bring it about that all long-term inhabitants of a modern democratic society are free and equal functioning members—equal citizens. To achieve this goal, it is not required that everybody has the same amount of money or anything close to that. Large material inequalities may be fully compatible with the ideal of democratic equality. What is required is not that everyone has the same but that everyone has *enough*. What counts as “enough” may vary. In different societies at different times, culture might determine various different amounts of power to purchase as central to genuine membership. If one is destitute, one is not really a democratic citizen with full standing, one is an alien in one’s own homeland. Walzer suggests this problem of maldistribution could be solved by redistribution—either by redistributing money to people directly via a negative income tax scheme (if my income in a give year is below X, the government assigns me a negative tax, and sends me a check that makes up the shortfall between my income for that year and X) or by guaranteeing jobs with minimal income. Walzer adds that there are other things we should be doing, besides guaranteeing a minimal decent income for all, to ensure we are all full free and equal citizens.

Walzer’s proposal is controversial in several ways. (1) Some might deny that people have obligations to others to maintain democratic equality as Walzer conceives it. (2) Some might deny that Walzer could provide a satisfactory nonarbitrary account of what is “enough” income and wealth. But in his scheme a lot hinges on where that threshold lies. (3) Some might deny that once everyone gets to the good enough level of access to money, whatever that is, distributive justice has nothing to say about how goods and opportunities are distributed to people above the threshold. (4) The negative income tax scheme seems to provide guaranteed access to some level of income deemed “enough,” independently of whether or not one is able to provide such income for oneself by one’s own efforts or is disposed to put forth such efforts. If Arneson simply chooses not to seek paid employment or self-employment and instead to spend all of his days surfing off Malibu, are others in society morally required to contribute to a tax scheme that pays him a minimum decent income each year, ensuring that he has enough? Some might regard such a tax scheme as unfair. (This Walzer discussion is a response to the possible Marx concern numbered “3” above.)