Marx on the Compatibility of Freedom and Necessity:
A Reply to David James

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Abstract: *In a recent paper David James argues for a new understanding of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in Marx's idea of a communist society. According to James, such compatibility has less to do with anything distinctive about the nature of labour and more to do with how communist producers organize the sphere of material production. In this paper, I argue that James provides a nuanced and plausible account of one part of Marx's story of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in communist society but that his account misses another, and, in my view, more fundamental part of the story. The part I have in mind centres on Marx's claim that communist producers achieve their freedom through the performance of necessary labour – by helping others to satisfy their needs. I argue that Marx is committed to a stronger claim than James wishes to make – namely, that freedom and necessity are not merely compatible, but that participation in the realm of necessity is required for human freedom.*

It is a distinctive feature of Marx's thought that he does not think that the fact that work is a matter of necessity – something that must be done if the human species is to reproduce itself – precludes its being free. Indeed, one of the good things about a future communist society, on Marx's brief account of it, is that it will create the conditions whereby the performance of necessary labour will take on this free character.[1]

However, two aspects of Marx's views on freedom and necessity have generated significant discussion among Marx's commentators. The first concerns the issue of the continuity of Marx's thought on these matters.[2] All commentators agree that Marx, at some point in his life, held the view that freedom and necessity are compatible. But was his optimistic belief in compatibility unwavering? According to the 'standard story', the early Marx held the view that freedom and necessity are compatible, but as he got older and learned more about economics, he instead argued that real freedom can only be achieved outside the working day. Strong exegetical evidence for this interpretation is often thought to come from a well-known passage in the third volume of *Capital*, where Marx describes work as inescapably belonging to a 'realm of necessity' and contrasts it with the 'true realm of freedom' that exists beyond it (Marx 1998: 807). While this account has generally held sway, however, other commentators have argued that Marx remained committed to the view that freedom and necessity are compatible in his later years, and that there is no change of views on this matter. Key to their argument is a

reinterpretation of the well-known passage from the third volume of *Capital* mentioned above, according to which while the highest form of freedom can only achieved outside the working day, there are still important forms of freedom to be had in necessary labour in a communist society. In previous work I have argued for an alternative to these two positions (Kandiyali 2014). In my view, we find in Marx's writings two models of freedom and necessity, but these two models cannot be understood in terms of a shift from the early to the later Marx as the 'standard story' suggests. Rather, Marx moves between these two models throughout his writings. It is an oscillation rather than a decisive shift.

The second problem, which has received less concerted attention than the first, concerns the manner in which Marx conceives of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in a communist society. It is this second problem to which David James has recently provided a detailed and philosophically sophisticated response (James 2017). James' distinctive idea is that it is not anything distinctive about the nature of labour that enables freedom to emerge within the realm of necessary, but rather the way communist producers organize the sphere material production. As he puts it, '[e]ssentially, it is the way in which production is organized by the workers themselves, rather than the activity of working taken by itself, that allows some room for freedom in the realm of necessity, and thus the possibility of working in conditions that are most appropriate to, and worthy of, human nature' (James 2017: 3).

In this paper, I argue that James provides a nuanced and plausible account of one part of Marx's story of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in communist society but that his account misses another, and, in my view, more fundamental part of the story. The part I have in mind centres on Marx's claim that communist producers achieve their freedom *through* the performance of socially necessary labour – by helping others to satisfy their needs. I argue that Marx is committed to a stronger claim than James wishes to make – namely, that freedom and necessity are not merely compatible, but that participation in the realm of necessity is required for human freedom.

James on Freedom and Necessity

Before I discuss James' explanation of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in Marx's idea of a communist society, I begin with a brief discussion of how commentators before him sought to explain this compatibility.

According to Sean Sayers, Marx's answer to the question of how freedom and necessity are compatible in communist society has to do with the difference

between animal and human production (Sayers 2011: 65-69). The basic point is that animals only produce when their immediate needs compel them to do so, whereas human beings produce even in the absence of need. Of course, labour in the realm of necessity is directed at needs, and so not fully free. However, it can still be said to manifest a degree of freedom in contrast to animal production, in that workers do not simply consume whatever is present in their environment to satisfy their own needs but work upon an object to satisfy the future needs of others.

While Sayers' account may provide a plausible explanation for why human activity is free in a way that an animal's is not, however, it does not adequately explain the difference between capitalism and communism. For even the most hateful alienated labour under capitalism involves working upon an object for future needs, rather than immediately consuming it. And yet, Marx would not want to describe such labour as anything more than minimally free. Thus Sayers' account fails to capture the way that a specifically communist society enables freedom to emerge in necessary labour.

Aiming to rectify this problem in Sayers' account and provide a plausible explanation of Marx's view in the third volume of *Capital*, where he talks of both freedom in the 'realm of necessity' and freedom in the 'true realm of freedom', in my earlier paper I made a distinction between two different concepts of freedom – both of which could be described as variants of positive freedom, and both of which can only be achieved in a communist society (Kandiyali 2014: 108-110). The first of these freedoms is collective self-determination, and it consists in future individuals rationally regulating the sphere of production that satisfies their needs, rather than being dominated by the 'blind force' of nature (as in pre-capitalist modes of production) or the market (as under capitalism). The second of these freedoms is individual self-realization, which consists in the development of essential human powers and capacities. My suggestion was that we can explain Marx's position in the third volume of *Capital* in terms of this distinction: while Marx typically holds that labour is required for individual self-realization, in the third volume of *Capital,* by contrast, he argues that although labour in the realm of necessity can be a realm of collective self-determination, it cannot, for reasons I found unpersuasive, be a realm of individual self-realization.

While James is sympathetic to my distinction between two concepts of freedom, he criticizes it for being 'too clear-cut' (James 2017: 3). In particular, 'although collective self-determination is indeed a characteristic feature of the realm of necessity in communist society, self-realization is, to some extent, also a characteristic feature of it' (James 2017: 3). Thus in James' view, it is not 'a matter

of either collective self-determination or individual self-realization'; rather, 'self-determination and self-realization...are to varying degrees all present in the realm of necessity as it would be in a communist society' (James 2017: 4). As a result, James contends that his less rigid account of Marxian freedom 'paves the way for a more nuanced view of the differences between freedom in the realm of necessity...and freedom in the true realm of freedom' (James 2017: 4).

To see how it does this, we can begin with James' account of how the realm of necessity can be said to be a realm of self-determination – or as he calls it, 'autonomy' or 'moral freedom' (James 2017: 5). Quoting Rousseau's famous remark that 'the impulsion of appetite alone is slavery, whereas obedience to the law one has prescribed to oneself is freedom', James argues that Marx can be seen to follow Rousseau in thinking that freedom and constraint are only compatible when the constraint in question can be said to derive from the willing agent herself. Now in the case of labour it might be hard to see how this condition could be met, since here the constraint seems to necessarily comes from an external source – namely the necessity of having to work to satisfy human needs. However, because a communist society is one in which workers 'agree among themselves how the production process should be organized and carried out', then although aspects of production may remain determined by 'necessity and mundane consideration', there might be some room for self-determination in the sphere of production. For instance, individuals might collectively decide 'who does what and when, how long each person works each day', as well as 'what to produce in what quantity, given the existence of certain social needs' (James 2017: 14). Thus in James' view, collectively deciding on matters like these 'allows us to speak of constraints to which individuals are subject that have their source in these individuals' own wills, even though these constraints at the same time have a source which is independent of their wills' (James 2017:15).

If the first step in James' reconstruction of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in Marx's idea of a communist society involves the idea that the organization of production by the workers allows some room for self-determination, the second involves the idea this organization can also be said to offer some degree of self-realization. The basic idea is that the organization of production by the workers involves the exercise and development of certain distinctly human powers and capacities, such as the capacity to deliberate and engage in acts of self-direction. Thus as James puts it, there is an 'internal relation between the exercise and development of distinctly human capacities (self-realization) and the act of organizing production in association with others (self-

determination), in so far as engaging in this act entails the exercise and development of these same capacities' (James 2017:16). Consequently, James argues that his account is able to explain how workers are able to achieve some degree of self-realization through their work – or more precisely, through the the organization of their work – even when the activity of their work itself may be relatively undemanding and hence an unlikely source of self-realization.

In this way, James provides a fairly optimistic account of freedom in the realm of necessity, in that both self-determination and some degree of self-realization are characteristic of it. However, although labour can be a vehicle for the self-determination and self-realization, it is important to emphasize that, on James' account, participation in the realm of necessity is not required for the realization of either freedom: other activities can realize them too. In fact, James argues that activities outside work offer individuals the greater opportunity for freedom. This is because work in modern industrial societies often involves rote tasks that do not lend themselves to self-realization, and because though certain aspects of the production process may be amenable to deliberation and decision, a large part of it remains determined by the requirements of producing for the needs of society (James 2017:17-18). Thus if fortuitous personal or productive conditions allow individuals not to work and to dedicate themselves entirely to 'genuinely personal projects', such as playing music in an amateur orchestra (James' example), then this would be a boon for human freedom. I shall return to this claim in the following section, for I believe it is at odds with Marx's considered view on the place of work in the good or free life.

I think it is fair to say that the textual evidence for James' view that the organization of material production by communist producers, as well as being a form of self-determination, can also lend itself to a degree of self-realization, is not especially strong. Indeed, James himself concedes that these themes are 'largely implicit' in Marx, and that some of Marx's remarks on this issue provide support for the more rigid separation between self-determination and self-realization he rejects and I defend, as for example when Marx says that 'the realm of freedom really begins only...beyond the sphere of material production' (Marx 1998: 807). To be fair to James, though, the exegetical evidence is often ambiguous and open to his interpretation, even if it does not directly confirm it. So to give one example: in another passage from the third volume of *Capital* that James does not quote but is congenial to his core claims, Marx writes that although workers under capitalism 'relate to the social nature of their labour, to its combination with the labour of others for a common purpose, as to an alien power...the situation is quite different

in factories owned by the labourers themselves, as in Rochdale, for instance' (Marx 1998: 89). This quotation is ambiguous because Marx does not explain why the ownership of factories by the workers at Rochdale avoids alienation, but it seems plausible that it is partly because their ownership of the factories gives them control over production, in a way that offers some degree of self-determination and hence self-realization. In any case, even if Marx himself did not explicitly suggest this, it is a plausible view and one that is, moreover, entirely in in the spirit of his thought.

I conclude, then, that James is right to argue that my earlier attempt to explain the difference between freedom in the 'realm of necessity' and freedom in the 'true realm of freedom', by making a distinction between two different kinds of freedom, relies on a distinction that is ultimately 'too clear-cut', even though some of Marx's remarks invite such an interpretation; and that James' account provides a more nuanced account of this part of the story of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in communist society. In the next section, however, I argue that James' own explanation of the compatibility of freedom and necessity in a communist society misses a more fundamental aspect of the Marxian story.

Self-Realization *Through* Labour

To make this claim, I begin by quoting the concluding passage of the early Marx's 'Comments on James Mill'. There, Marx invites the reader to imagine that we had 'produced as human beings', which is to say, in a non-alienated fashion under communism. In that case:

> '1) In my *production* I would have objectified my *individuality*, its *specific character*, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual *manifestation of my life* during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be *objective, visible to the senses* and hence a power *beyond all doubt*. 2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a *human* need by my work, that is, of having objectified *man's* essential nature [*Wesen*], and of having thus created an object corresponding to the needs of another man's essential nature. 3) I would have been for you the *mediator* [*der mittler*] between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion [*Ergänzung*] of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love. 4) In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realised* my true nature, my human nature, my communal nature [*mein wahres Wesen, mein menschliches, mein Gemeinwesen*]

(Marx 1975a: 277–288).

This is a complex passage, which I can only briefly summarize here.[3] The key point is that Marx is describing a communist society as one in which individuals achieve self-realization *through* labour – by helping others to satisfy their needs. Thus in (1) Marx claims that in non-alienated production I would enjoy an individual expression of life during production and in knowing my personality to be manifest in the product I create. However, in (2) through to (4) Marx emphasizes how my production serves another, satisfies their need, and how that production for others contributes to my own, as well as the others, self-realization. Thus when you consume my product, I experience the enjoyment of knowing that my activity has satisfied your need. Because I have satisfied your need, you recognize me as the 'completion' of your essential nature. And finally, because I recognize that you appreciate my production for you, my cognizance of your appreciation completes my self-realization.

What I want to emphasize is that this account of self-realization through labour that meets the needs of others, labour that characterizes production in a communist society, involves a distinctive conception of the relationship between freedom and necessity.[4] According to this conception, freedom is not merely compatible with necessity. Rather, the necessity of labour is part of the explanation for why labour is a free and self-realizing activity. For it is only in labour that 'I would have the direct enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a *human* need', and it is only when I have satisfied another's need that I can be recognized as completing another's 'essential nature'. Of course, one could enjoy 'genuinely personal projects' that are not directed at meeting needs. But, for reasons given, the type of self-realization that Marx identifies here can only be had in the realm of necessity.

To see the distinctiveness of Marx's view on this matter, we may ask the following question, which James also considers in his paper – namely, what would Marx think of a society where needs are met without people having to work, so that people may devote themselves to whatever they find intrinsically enjoyable? A description of the kind of society I have in mind is provided – and endorsed – by Hume:

> 'Let us suppose that nature has bestowed on the human race such a profuse abundance of all external conveniences, that, without any uncertainty in the event, without any care or industry on our part, every individual finds himself fully provided with whatever his most voracious appetites can want, or luxurious imagination wish or desire...No laborious occupation required; no tillage, no navigation. Music, poetry, and contemplation form his sole business: conversation, mirth and

friendship his sole amusement' (Hume 1994: 80).

Now, I think that Marx, in contrast to Hume, would not see such a situation as an ideal. For in Marx's view, people realize their nature by engaging their powers and capacities in the satisfaction of another's needs. Thus people could not flourish if God were to rain manna from heaven, because that would make producing for others superfluous. In conditions of superabundance, people would not enjoy the knowledge that they had satisfied another's essential needs, or the recognition of others for completing their essential nature. Thus their self-realization would be incomplete. Now this does not commit Marx to the implausible view that 'the more labour the better', for even if labour is required for self-realization it does not follow that the more we work, the more we flourish. What human beings need, Marx thought, is 'a totality of human manifestations of life', that is, both labour and leisure (Marx 1975b: 304). Thus if productive conditions allow people to labour for, say, four hours a day and then pursue personal projects in the remaining time, this would be compatible with the requirements of Marxian self-realization, as I interpret it. What is not compatible, however, is a situation where people do not need to work at all, the situation described by Hume.

The difference between my interpretation and James' should now be apparent. In my view, participation in the realm of necessity is required for the achievement of freedom and self-realization. In James' view, by contrast, such participation is not. More precisely, in James' view participation is *compatible* with freedom, because the organization of production by communist producers provides some degree of self-determination and hence self-realization. But it is not *required* for freedom, because other activities can realize these freedoms to a higher degree. Thus people will be more free if they are liberated from the constraint of having to produce for others. On this issue, James' Marx agrees with Hume.

Now I think that Marx's considered view is that labour is required for freedom and self-realization. Let me provide some exegetical evidence, in addition to the passage above, in support of this claim. In the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', Marx describes labour as ‘life activity’, ‘species life’, and as the 'spiritual essence [*Wesen*]', the '*human* essence’ (Marx 1975b: 276-277). He also criticizes the political economists for mistakenly seeing labour – the 'wealth of human endeavour' – only in its relation to 'utility', as ''*need*'', ''*vulgar need*'''. In reality, the history of industry and the established objective existence of industry are the open book of man's essential powers' (Marx 1975b: 302-303). Although these views are especially strong in the 1844 writings, they do not disappear in Marx's later work. Thus in the *Grundrisse*, for example, Marx criticizes both the Christian view that labour is a

punishment for our fallen nature as well as Adam Smith's view that leisure is the ideal state of things and identical with 'liberty' and 'happiness'. As he puts it, it '[i]t does not seem remotely to occur to him [Smith] that the individual "in his ordinary state of health, strength, spirits, skill, dexterity" also needs a normal portion of labour' (Marx 1987: 529-530). Likewise, in the first volume of *Capital* Marx questions whether a society of great abundance where needs are met without people having to work would be most conducive to self-realization. On those rare occasions when the necessities of life are provided gratis, writes Marx, nature 'keeps [man] in hand, like a child in leading-strings...[and] does not impose upon him any necessity to develop himself' (Marx 1996: 515). And finally, in the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme', Marx famously says that in a future communist society labour will become 'not only a means of life, but life's prime want' (Marx 1989: 87). On this view, work is not only necessary (a 'means of life), but something that people would choose to do above all else ('life's prime want').[5]

In reply to quotations such as these, James may concede the textual evidence for my interpretation, but argue that his reconstruction offers the more plausible account of freedom, and should therefore be adopted on those grounds. In particular, he might emphasize how his account does not rely on any controversial perfectionist assumptions – for example, about the nature of the human good, or the fulfilling nature of specific types of human activity (James 2017:18). However, I would argue that these controversial perfectionist assumptions are essential to Marx's position, and it is questionable whether an account that jettisons them could really be said to capture either the letter or the spirit of Marx's writings. Furthermore, while James' interpretation may indeed provide a more palatable version of Marx for contemporary political philosophy, with its suspicion of perfectionism, his approach also threatens to empty Marx's position of its distinctive content. For consider: James' interpretation makes Marx broadly congruent with the dominant view in the history of philosophy – here exemplified by Hume – that it is time outside work that is most conducive to human freedom and self-realization.[6] Finally, though I have no time to defend this thesis here, I believe that the view that labour has some special significance for freedom and self-realization is more defensible than James imagines.[7]

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i In this paper I use the the terms 'work' and 'labour' interchangeably to refer to production directed at meeting human needs.

i For discussion of this debate, see Kandiyali 2014.

i For an excellent discussion of this passage, see Brudney 1997: 169-192.

i Admittedly, Marx does not mention 'freedom' in this passage. However, he

is clearly talking about self-realization, and in various places he makes clear that he has a self-realization conception of freedom. For instance, in the *Grundrisse* he describes labour as 'self-realization, objectification of the subject, and thus real freedom, whose action is precisely work' (Marx 1987: 530). Likewise, in the famous quotation from the third volume of *Capital*, Marx might also be seen to equate freedom and self-realization. There, the 'true realm of freedom' is glossed as the 'development of human energy an end in itself' (Marx 1998: 807).

i James quotes this passage, but in my view it does not support his position. For here Marx suggests that work will become the foremost need in life, whereas James describes labour as something that people would reasonably choose not to do if the productive conditions allowed it.

i In general, I think that James overemphasizes what we might call the Rousseauian or Kantian side of Marx's thought (concerning autonomy or self-determination) and concurrently underplays the Aristotelian side – the side that emphasizes that the good or free life is one spent exercising and developing one's distinctly human powers.

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