

Human Flourishing, Normativity and Critical Theory

Andrius Bielskis

Centre for Aristotelian Studies and Critical Theory, Mykolas Romeris University
Kaunas University of Technology
Email andrius.bielskis@ktu.lt
ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3560-5846>

Abstract. Aristotle has traditionally been aligned with conservative social and political philosophy. The conservative reception has been challenged by Alasdair MacIntyre and the Marx-inspired reading of Aristotle. Following MacIntyre's arguments, this paper sketches an alternative conception of the critical theory beyond the Frankfurt School's critique of the contemporary culture and the modern society. Critical theory is understood as an attempt to provide both historical analysis and normative critique of the contemporary society and its culture. It argues that normativity should be understood not in Kantian, but in Aristotelian terms. The articulation of Aristotelian conceptions of human flourishing and *aretē*, rather than that of the *bürgerlich* conception of Kantian duty, should be at the centre of contemporary theorising. The author claims that Aristotle's practical philosophy allows us to conceptualise ethics beyond the dominant conceptions of ethical normativity prevalent in the capitalist modernity, while Marx is important because his analysis provides us with theoretical tools for the historically informed critique of the social and economic structures of the modern society.

Keywords: Human Flourishing; Critical Theory; Normativity; Aristotle; Marx; MacIntyre; Kant

Žmogiškasis klestėjimas, normatyvumas ir kritinė teorija

Santrauka. Aristotelis tradiciškai buvo interpretuojamas kaip konservatyvus socialinės ir politinės filosofijos autorius. Konservatyviai recepcijai iššūkį metė Alasdairo MacIntyre'o ir Marxo įkvėptas Aristotelio skaitymas. Remiantis MacIntyre'o argumentais, straipsnyje pateikiama alternatyvi kritinės teorijos samprata, atsispiriant nuo, bet nesekant Frankfurto mokyklos šiuolaikinės kultūros ir visuomenės kritika. Kritinė teorija suprantama kaip bandymas pateikti tiek istorinę analizę, tiek normatyvinę šiuolaikinės visuomenės ir jos kultūros kritiką. Teigiama, kad normatyvumą reikia suprasti ne kantiškai, bet aristoteliškai. Taip suprastos kritinės teorijos centre yra aristoteliškos žmogiško klestėjimo ir *aretē* (moralinio tobulumo), o ne Kanto pareigos sampratų artikuliacija. Straipsnyje paaiškinama, kodėl kritinei teorijai svarbūs Aristotelis ir Marxas. Aristotelio praktinė filosofija leidžia konceptualizuoti žmogišką klestėjimą ir etiką anapus vyraujančių normatyvumo sampratų, paplitusių kapitalistinėje modernybėje, o Marxas svarbus, kadangi suteikia teorinius įrankius istoriškai pagrįstai šiuolaikinės visuomenės socialinių ir ekonominių struktūrų kritikai.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: žmogiškasis klestėjimas, kritinė teorija, normatyvumas, Aristotelis, Marxas, MacIntyre'as, Kantas

Acknowledgement. This research was funded by a grant (No. S-MIP-21-48) issued by the Research Council of Lithuania. I am most grateful for the thoughtful and accurate comments by the anonymous reviewers whom I most likely know from my numerous social encounters at the conferences of the International Society for MacIntyrean Enquiry.

Received: 05/10/2022. **Accepted:** 09/01/2023

Copyright © Andrius Bielskis, 2023. Published by Vilnius University Press.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Introduction

Aristotle and Aristotelianism have traditionally been aligned with conservative political philosophy.¹ Aristotle's claims and arguments in support of 'natural' inequalities between men and women, and between 'natural masters' and 'natural slaves', among other things, made such an alignment unproblematic.² However, the conservative reception of Aristotle has been challenged ever since the publication of Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) and the recent interpretation of his work as revolutionary Aristotelianism.³ In this paper, following MacIntyre's approach to Aristotle and Aristotelianism, I shall aim to sketch an alternative conception of the critical theory beyond the Frankfurt School's – primarily Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno – critique of the contemporary culture and the modern society. I shall argue that essential to this task should be a normative conception of human flourishing without which the critique of the existing social and political structures would be problematic. The critical theory will be understood as a normative theory which aims to provide both normative and historical critique and analysis of the contemporary society and its culture. I shall argue that normativity should be understood not in Kantian, but in Aristotelian terms – the central concept of which is that of human flourishing. The articulation of Aristotelian practical rationality and *aretē* (excellence) rather than the *bürgerlich* conception of Kantian duty should be at the centre of progressive normative theorising. Hence the importance of Aristotle *and* Marx. Aristotle is important because his practical philosophy allows us to conceptualise ethics as intimately linked with the conception of human flourishing and, therefore, it allows us to transcend the dominant deontological conceptions of ethical normativity which is prevalent in capitalist modernity. Marx is important because his analysis provides us with theoretical tools for the historically informed critique of the social and economic structures of the modern society.

¹ I am especially grateful for the reviewer's comment that the main question of the normative critical theory I outline in the paper – the question of how to articulate the new forms of anti-capitalist life and its politics – “is a practical question and needs to be understood in terms of the forms of life & practices that might provide resistance to the standpoint of civil society,” and that, therefore, MacIntyre's Aristotelianism “goes beyond Marxism” if the latter is understood as a “mass political movement in Marxist terms.” Indeed! What puts MacIntyre's Aristotelianism at odds with most of the 20th century Marxism is the Hegelian-Marxian teleology, so admired by Lenin, which directs anti-capitalist politics to a revolutionary event (or a sequence of events) due to which the state power is seized and human emancipation is established. MacIntyre endorsed it in his early work (see MacIntyre 2009) but rejected it in the *After Virtue* project. As he himself puts it, practices as conceptualised in *After Virtue* “stand in sharp contrast to the practical life of civil society,” a contrast which is “best expressed in Aristotelian rather than Hegelian terms” (MacIntyre 1998: 225). Having endorsed the rejection and MacIntyre's politics of local communities in the past, I am less convinced about the incompatibility between the two now (on the critical assessment of MacIntyre's politics of local communities (I) *and* the necessity of anti-capitalist political struggles within the institutional setting of the modern state (II); see Bielskis 2012, 2015).

² By conservative reading and appropriation of Aristotle here I mean, for example, the conservative and/or republican political theory of Hannah Arendt, Leo Strauss, and, more recently, Thomas S. Hibbs.

³ The term 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' has been coined by Kelvin Knight (1996, 2007).

Critical theory and normativity

First of all, it is important to provide a working definition of the critical theory. By the term ‘critical theory’ I do not necessarily mean what the Frankfurt School theorists meant by it – although there is considerable continuity between their understanding and my own. Max Horkheimer, for example, saw critical theory as rooted in the fundamental thesis that we cannot determine what good and free society is from within the society in which we are currently living. He thought that we simply had no means to do so. In this claim, of course, Horkheimer followed Marx and his critique of utopian socialism. What is therefore possible instead is to engage in the critique of the negative aspects of our society, and, in so doing, to change them. By claiming that, Karl Marx was unable to see the dialectical relationship between freedom and justice, whereas, Max Horkheimer argued that the more freedom there is, the less justice there is, and *vice versa* (Horkheimer 2002: vii). Essentially, for Horkheimer, the goal of the critical theory was “man’s emancipation from slavery” (*ibid*: 246). The trajectory of human emancipation from slavery was the transformation towards freedom understood as negatively linked to justice. Thus, following Marx, Horkheimer understood justice both in terms of *and* closely linked to the *Staatsrecht* – the bourgeois state, its administrative system, and a given set of laws within the capitalist mode of production in each society. In arguing that there is a negative dialectical relationship between justice and freedom, Horkheimer was informed not only by Hegel and Marx, but also by Kant. Thus, Horkheimer inherited an essentially Kantian conception of justice, morality and normativity, a conception which he was *rightly* sceptical of.

Horkheimer criticised Kant and the neo-Kantian approach to social philosophy for their inability to see that comprehensive social analysis is possible only if it is based on the “overarching structures of” a “supraindividual whole, which could only be discovered in the social totality” (Horkheimer 1993: 2). For Kant and Kantians, to assert the existence of these structures and such totality would be seen as a “dogmatic, and action oriented to them would be considered heteronomous” (*ibid.*). Normativity based on “the eternal Ought” – which “originates in the depths of subjectivity”, i.e., the “belief in its own unconditionality by making no reference whatsoever to any historical moment” – is naïve because it lacks historical context and reference to the real world of conflicting interests (*ibid*: 2, 17). Furthermore, in his essay *Materialism and Morality* dating back to 1933, Horkheimer correctly argued that “the modern problem of morality in its essentials has its roots in the bourgeois order” (*ibid*: 18). Its emphasis on the individual, on the abstract reason, on the distinction between duty and interest mirrors the reality of the incommensurability of economic interests. However, Kantian morality has a naïve, utopian aspect to it as well: the supposed harmony of interests of all, achieved through the individual self-imposition of the rational will to follow the duty, is nothing else but a charitable miracle (*ibid*: 26) – hence Horkheimer’s emphasis is laid on the material conditions of our lives and the importance of historically informed analysis in our attempts to understand the complexities of the present.

Following but going beyond these insights, the critical theory, I want to argue, should be conceptualised as a *normative* critique of the society and its culture from a historical

perspective. *Historically* informed enquiry is important because it allows us to analyse the structures of the present-day social reality by emphasising their genesis, historical connections, and determinations. The reflection on the *temporality* of the present is an essential aspect of the critical theory. A historical perspective, among other things, frees us from the illusions of the naturalisation of the dominant social forms of the contemporary society (hence, the contrast between the critical theory and the simple-minded positivism, with its emphasis on empirical data as a snapshot of the present). Capitalism has created social forms that are not natural, and, on top of that, they are not intrinsic to the human condition. If looked at from the point of view of Marx's discussion on alienation, they are inimical to the flourishing human life (this is a point to which I shall return in the next section). The unnaturalness of the present, however, can be fully grasped only if we look at the social world historically.

The normative aspect of the critical theory is significant because it provides an *ethical* basis for the critique of Horkheimer's contemporary society. Following Marx's conception of historical materialism, the first-generation theorists of the Frankfurt School looked at the *ethical* suspiciously. However, there are plenty of normative claims, most often implicit but occasionally also explicit, in Horkheimer's conceptualisation of the critical theory. The notion of freedom (and the emancipation from slavery) is a normative concept unless, of course, one understands freedom in purely negative terms. Horkheimer also maintained that "[e]conomics in isolation will therefore not provide the norm by which the community of men is to be measured" (Horkheimer 2002: 249). Measuring our societies from a normative point of view is, therefore, an important task of the critical theory. The question is how a critical theorist should understand normativity. Here I want to suggest that the focal point of the content of normativity should stem from a neo-Aristotelian conception of the human *flourishing* and *meaningful* life (applied both to collectives and individuals) rather than *freedom* and *duty*, while the methodological-philosophical approach of the inquiry into the historical embodiments of flourishing and meaningful life should involve *both* hermeneutics and genealogy (including ideology critique) against the background of the materialist conception of history as proposed by Marx in the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. This is the point to be discussed in the next section.

It is important to say something on how *not* to conceptualise normativity. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno were right when, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they compared Immanuel Kant and Marquis de Sade. Kant is Sade's *alter ego* – they are dialectically related. The "work of the Marquis de Sade exhibits 'understanding [reason] without direction from another' – that is to say, the bourgeois subject freed from all tutelage" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 68). According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Kant's "attempt to derive the duty of mutual respect from a law of reason [...] has no support within the *Critique*. It is the usual endeavour of the bourgeois thought to ground the respect without which civilization cannot exist on something other than material interest [...]. The citizen who renounced a profit out of the Kantian motive of respect for the mere form of the law would not be enlightened but superstitious – a fool" (*ibid*: 67). Indeed, without the link between the ethical and material interest, without the link between *desire* rooted in our specific

form of (biological) human life and *ethics*, normativity will be rejected or ignored when those interests become subsumed into the economic system of domination.

Thus, Kantian ethics are *bürgerlich*, among other things, because it is rooted in the ascetic separation of desires and inclinations *from* the practical reason. Its practical rationality is also procedural, by virtue of imposing its formal order on the will. Although Kantian ethics is not exactly contractarian, its essential character is that of rule-following – even if these rules are conceptualised as duties enforced on the will by autonomous reason. In this sense, Kantian ethics create conditions for the contractual social order necessary for the development of a market-centred society, and, later, of the capitalist relations of production. We should interpret the universality of Kant's categorical moral imperative and moral law genealogically – that is, in a dialectical relationship with the existing positive law established by the sovereignty of the bourgeois-liberal state created by the Hobbesian/Lockean social contract. The autonomy of the *a priori* practical reason of an enlightened individual – the bourgeois as an ideal type – transforms into the laws of the liberal state aimed at protecting its citizens' "human rights." In *On The Jewish Question*, Marx enquires what these human rights actually are, and ends up replying that they "are nothing but the rights of a *member of civil society* – i.e., the rights of egoistic man, of man separated from other men and from the community," the society being one of atomised individuals as property owners who are protected against each other by law in a similar way "as the boundary between two fields is determined by a boundary post" (Marx 2008). In this respect, Kantian ethics presuppose his contractarian political philosophy.

Yet the contract-based political *and* social order soon evolves into a hierarchical order of instrumental planning, organisation, and domination very similar to the "gymnasts' pyramids in Sade's orgies and the formalized principles of early bourgeois freemasonry" (Horkheimer & Adorno 2002: 69). Kantian ethics separate the autonomous will from the heteronomous will and draw a sharp distinction between inclinations (*Neigungen*) and duty. By *rejecting desires* as something that is unable to motivate us to be moral, Kant's deontology removes the motivational force behind the ethical action (in this respect, Kantian ethics are in strict opposition to Aristotelian ethics which emphasise the need to educate our desires). The imposed rational Kantian moral order – the arbitrary commands of duties – is akin to Freudian superego: it represses desires and sexuality – which return in their terrible, more powerful, and destructive forms. Alasdair MacIntyre was right when he suggested that the birth of this moral imagination has to do with the protestant theology – first and foremost, that of Luther and Calvin – and its belief that human desires are totally depraved (MacIntyre 1998: 122). The arbitrariness of Kant's autonomous practical reason and the arbitrariness of the reformer's God create space for the arbitrary choice: "[b]ecause all desires are corrupt (although as always, sex usually takes the worst beating...), choice remains open. Between salvation and damnation, between profit and loss, between the multitude of competing policies which claim his/[her] attention, the individual has to choose" (*ibid.*).

We find an excellent example of the institutionalisation of Kantian ethics in late 19th century European (German, to be precise) society in Thomas Mann's literary work. In his

Buddenbrooks, there is an ironic passage which illustrates how Kant's ethics became an essential part of the ideological superstructure of the Prussian school and society:

Where previously classical learning had been considered a joyful end in itself and was pursued with a calm, leisurely, cheerful idealism, now the concepts of authority, duty, power, service, and career were held in highest honor; and in every official speech he delivered, Director Wulicke would unfurl the ominous banner of "the categorical imperative of our philosopher Kant." The school had become a state within the state, where the Prussian notion of rigorous service held such sway that not only the teachers but also the students thought of themselves as civil servants, interested only in advancing their careers and therefore always concerned to be well regarded by those in power (Mann 1994: 630).

In this respect, Thomas Mann is important because his work and life demonstrate that the dominant morality in the early 20th century Germany was indeed understood in Kantian terms (hence, the Frankfurt School theorists also understood normativity in these terms). This is also important since it shows how the German *literati*, and artists in general, turned to Nietzsche in their rebellion against (Kantian) morality. Inspired by Nietzsche, Thomas Mann juxtaposed artistic creativity, eroticism, and irony against what he took to be the bourgeois way of life and its morality: duty, family life without love, and hard but dull work. However, not all ethics presuppose *bourgeois* morality, and not every normativity is a *bürgerlich* normativity.

Human flourishing and Aristotelian critical theory

To claim that normativity should be intimately linked to a conception of human flourishing already presupposes a certain tradition of philosophical enquiry. To phrase it in this way is to phrase it the way Aristotle phrased it. I have argued elsewhere that hermeneutics, as the art of interpretation, necessarily presupposes the existence of a certain tradition (Bielskis 2005: 95–116). The importance of tradition was conceptualised, among others, by H.G. Gadamer. He argued that tradition both conditioned our understanding/interpretation *and* was continued through the act of interpretation, which Gadamer conceptualised in terms of the application of meaning (of a historical text) *here and now* (Gadamer 2002: 277–311). He understood tradition, however, as a cultural-linguistic context, due to which, fore-projections of meaning in the form of prejudice became possible. In short, for Gadamer, tradition is, on the one hand, the source of our fore-projections of meaning in our attempts to understand another person or a historical text. On the other hand, by interpreting a historical text whereby we apply its meaning by posing the question of its truth *here and now*, we continue and revitalise tradition. However, Gadamer conceptualised tradition in singular terms and never acknowledged the fact that the content of the tradition he was writing about was in fact a particular tradition. While drawing on Aristotle's ethics and its relevance for hermeneutics, Gadamer never explicitly argued that there were different traditions and, therefore, different hermeneutics. In this respect, Alasdair MacIntyre's conception of tradition as an argument extended through time, and

his account of the European philosophy in terms of the hermeneutic history of different traditions is an important improvement of Gadamer's hermeneutics.⁴

The relevance of the point above for the current argument is to substantiate our earlier claim that the philosophical method of inquiry into the historical embodiments of flourishing and meaningful life is that of hermeneutics. The inquiry into human flourishing requires, in part, hermeneutic engagement with the philosophical tradition of one's predecessors. We learn about the conceptions of the good life from the fruitful interpretations of our predecessors – in this case, Aristotle – and by doing so we extend the tradition and develop its arguments in the hope of their relevance today. Reading Aristotle and other authors of Aristotelian tradition furnishes us with an ethical imagination and normativity which have nothing to do with cold moralising in terms of the formal duties – the duties which are external to our actions. Aristotle's conception of *aretē* – moral excellence or virtue – enables the right kind of action. He inherited the understanding of *aretē* from Plato and Socrates, but considerably modified it. For Socrates, *aretē* meant knowledge, but *aretē* as moral excellence was always *functional* and was never associated with, nor did it mean *taboo*. *Aretē* did not mean compliance with the universal rules, either, that is, the rules which are decoupled from concrete situations. For Aristotle, *aretē* meant a trained ethical disposition manifested in various features of our character. Aristotle called this disposition *hexis* without which a thriving active human life was impossible. Thus, normativity is that which gives us the means to create *not* a formal universality, which is imposed on the will as an external rule, but a flourishing and meaningful individual and collective life.

For Aristotle, a flourishing human life is a life of activity. The word Aristotle used to describe human flourishing was *eudaimonia*, commonly translated as 'happiness'. Yet a better translation is 'well-being' (or indeed, human flourishing), since *eudaimonia* is not a feeling or a state of mind. *Eudaimonia* is the activity of exercising our essential human faculties well rather than badly. Aristotle's so-called function argument can be misunderstood if we read it literally: if a spoon has a function, and so do animals (they perceive, procreate, feed). Then, should not human beings have one as well? *Logos* is the only faculty that distinguishes humans from other animals, thus reasoning must be the characteristic *ergon* (function) of human beings. Simplifying considerably, Aristotle's argument is that – given that philosophical contemplation enables us to deploy our rational faculties to the full – philosophy must be the highest activity of an excellent human life. Such a literal reading of the function argument should, of course, be avoided. A much more fruitful interpretation today would be to argue that a flourishing human life consists of a variety of meaningful practices which enhance our creative, rational, and imaginative powers. Not all activities are equally choice-worthy, and the choices we make depend on

⁴ This is how MacIntyre defines tradition: "A tradition is an argument extended through time in which certain fundamental agreements are defined and redefined in terms of two kinds of conflicts: those with critics and enemies external to the tradition who reject all or at least key parts of those fundamental agreements, and those internal, interpretative debates through which the meaning and rationale of the fundamental agreements come to be expressed and by whose progress a tradition is constituted" (MacIntyre 1988: 12).

what kinds of people we are. When our choices are directed by virtues, we take pleasure in activities which are meaningful and noble. Aristotle's ethical realism presupposes that moral excellences which we acquire through the right kind of habituation (directed by individual and collective practical reasoning) allow us to judge things and situations – choices, preferences, desires, actions, habits, and laws – as they are, rather than as what they seem to be. When our minds and characters are trained in virtues, we can see the alienated and corrupting nature of economic and political institutions built solely on money-making and profit maximisation.

The claim that humans are political animals and Aristotle's emphasis on friendship (including civic friendship) not only makes Aristotelian ethics and normativity political, but it also means that leading a flourishing life is only possible in a well-structured political society. *The Nicomachean Ethics* begins and ends with the claim that the enquiry its author has embarked on is political in its essence, and that the audience of the *Ethics* are those who are or will be involved in law-making. Aristotle did not compartmentalise the political from the ethical in a manner so essential to the modern liberal political and moral theorising – the *Ethics* and *Politics* constitute a single enquiry of political philosophy. The key to his political philosophy was the question of what kind of education a political society that values freedom, peace over war, various scientific enquiries and arts, equality of its citizens, and, overall, civic friendship should provide to its children and youth. Aristotle argued that the aim of children's education should not be pursued in order to "save people from making mistakes in their private purchases" or "from being deceived in the buying and selling of articles," but to make them capable of seeing the "beauty of form and figure," adding that to "aim at utility everywhere" was unsuited to "those who have the character of freemen" (Aristotle 1995: 1338b1–8). Linked to these claims is his account of what the best political community would be like, what the true wealth is, and what role it should play in the best life.

By claiming that "the best way of life" is "the life of *aretē* sufficiently equipped with the resources needed to share in the activity of excellence" (Aristotle 1995: 1323b41–1324a2), Aristotle dismissed the life of imperial power as a candidate for the good life. The guiding principle of the life of collective excellence, therefore, should be the virtue of moderation. Moderation is central for Aristotle's discussion on the nature of *polis*, *oikonomia* (household management), the art of acquisition (*chrēmatistikē*), and trade (*kapēlikē*). Its conclusion is Aristotle's claim that true wealth (*alēthinōs ploutos*) has a natural limit. Putting it in Marxian terms, wealth should not be seen in terms of exchange-value, but in terms of its use-value. Aristotle therefore concurs with Marx and the opening claim of the *Capital* – or its inversion, to be more precise – that true wealth (rather than wealth looked at from the point of view of *kapēlikē*, the life of the *free-trader vulgaris*) is the sum of all use-values available to us. Although there is no direct connection between Aristotle's insight on the distorted view of wealth as exchange-value and money (*nomisma*) on the one hand, and his account of alienated wage-labour (*penēs*) and elitist political exclusion of workers, on the other hand, the notion of the political rule – the rule of the free and equal in turn – allows us to appropriate Aristotle's arguments for our critique of the sphere of production. That

is, Aristotle's conception of *politeia* – the best political way of life based on equality and ruling in turn – should be applied not only at the political level, but also at the economic level, or, as Marx put it, to the sphere of the “hidden abode of production,” with the notice on its threshold of “No admittance except on Business” (Marx 1992: 118).

This was indeed Marx's line of argumentation much later. Like Aristotle, Marx saw human life as an activity. Thus, instead of limiting the scope of his critique only to political structures – to the sphere of political democracy and civic rights – he argued that the Enlightenment's principles of freedom and equality should also be applied to the sphere of production. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, he conceptualised several forms of alienation. First, given that labour power is sold and bought as a commodity, productive relations become subordinated to commodity relations. Marx reiterates this claim by introducing the concept of commodity fetishism in *Capital*: social relations in production are governed not by the free creativity of workers, but rather by impersonal and deified commodity relations. Secondly, the product created by the worker's labour is alien to its producer. The objectification of labour in a finished commodity means the loss of reality for the worker and the total impoverishment of the worker's life-world (Marx 1988: 72). Since workers can no longer rely on access to the natural world for subsistence, they are forced to sell their labour. Thus, wage-labour is forced labour in capitalism. Finally, labour under capitalism lacks any spontaneity and degrades the humanity of the worker to mere animal functioning. Marx's similarity to Aristotle becomes especially apparent when he argues that such human life is an activity which is turned against itself. As the essential activity of man's species life – due to which man “forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty” (*ibid.*) – labour is reduced in capitalism to a means of supporting the worker's physical existence only. Estranged labour, and the time spent in it, obstructs humans from leading creative and meaningful lives.⁵

Of course, Marx conceptualised alienation against the background of 19th century industrial capitalism, when workers were much poorer, and their working day was longer than it is today. Some forms of contemporary labour have also become less debilitating, yet Marx's account of alienation is still largely relevant given the contemporary forms of precarious and meaningless labour and the growth of poverty in the working poor (Andres & Lohmann 2008). Capitalism as the economic system of production has created enormous wealth, and workers – also due to their organised struggles – have had a share in this. Thus, to claim, as Marx did, that “a section of the working class falls into the ranks of beggary or starvation” (*ibid.*: 23) would be largely wrong today in developed capitalist societies. Yet, new forms of alienation and reification, as György Lukács (1971) called

⁵ Ruth Groff (2015) argued that, although Marx never developed a fully-fledged ethical theory, we still find a normative Aristotelian infrastructure in Marx's *Das Kapital*. In *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx conceptualises essential human nature (which he called *Gattungswesen*) against the background of Aristotle's *dunamis* (potentiality) and *entelecheia* (actualisation of purpose). Just like Aristotle, Marx argues that a human being, unlike other animals, is a self-creating rational being, whose ‘species being’ lies in their freedom to create themselves through rational creative activity (that is, through work). The Kantian element lies in Marx's claim that people perceive themselves as free and universal beings.

them, are ample in the 21st century societies. Some of these forms were acutely analysed by Axel Honneth (2008) and David Graber (2018). To advance research into these new forms of alienation would be an important task for the critical normative theory. At the centre of such theorising would be the normative notion of human flourishing spelled out above – the interpretation of which, as we have suggested, has the methodological form of hermeneutic engagement with the Aristotelian tradition.

The critical aspect of the normative theory thus understood should also have the methodological form of genealogy and a critique of ideology against the background of Marx's historical materialist understanding of the forces *and* relations of production. As it has been argued, following Foucault's genealogical analysis of discursive power regimes (Foucault 1991), genealogy has been conceptualised as the analysis of the dominant discourse and thought vis-à-vis power relations and in terms of the effects that thought and discourse have on shaping our identities (Bielskis 2005: 30–84). The critical theorists of the Frankfurt School also advanced the critique of consumer capitalist societies by arguing that their popular cultures functioned as a form of ideology justifying the existing power relations and leaving alienation intact. The differences and similarities between the Foucaultian genealogical critique and the Frankfurt School's ideology critique have been recently analysed, and arguments have been presented that the differences between them lie in the fact that they were influenced by different philosophical theories: Foucault reconceptualised Nietzsche's genealogy, while the theorists of the Frankfurt School followed Marx and his notion of ideology (Bielskis 2018). Apart from these philosophical differences between the genealogical critique of the dominant discourses of consumer capitalism (e.g., the forms of kitsch embodied in the popular culture which make their consumers docile) and the ideology critique of erroneous self-images of our age (*from* the emphasis on cultural difference and identity politics by the liberal left *to* nativism, nationalism and the "traditional family values" on the right), these critiques (and their content) may not be so different. In short, the normative critical theory informed by the Aristotelian conceptualisation of human flourishing should engage in the genealogical critique of the dominant forms of the ideological discourse. Genealogical analysis should show what effects certain concepts and discourse have produced (e.g., as suggested above, how the Kantian conception of duty reinforced the contractual social order essential to modern capitalism and the Prussian cultural environment of careerist rigorous service so hated by the young Thomas Mann), while the critique of ideology should analyse what forms of social consciousness are produced and reproduced by alienated social relations against the background of the existing forces of production.

In the preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx famously formulated his methodology of historical materialism. He distinguished between the material forces of production consisting of tools, technology and know-how, *and* relations of production – that is, property relations. Together, they constitute an economic structure of the society, a certain mode of production – the material base of the society – out of which, a specific form of the social consciousness, with its expressions in legal, political, religious, and artistic spheres emerges. Marx's materialist conception of history has been

criticised numerous times for its determinism, yet, his claim that the consciousness of men determines their existence rather than *vice versa* should not be understood as if an economic base *determines* the content of human consciousness as the ideological superstructure of the society.⁶ It simply means a non-controversial claim that consciousness is reactive, that it is temporarily secondary to our existence, and that consciousness develops in response to the world we find ourselves in. Marx simply insisted that, in order to understand the fundamental processes of the society, we need to start our analysis from the key material conditions of our existence: from the fact that humans have needs, and that in order to satisfy them, they must produce something by making and using tools. In this sense, historical materialism in no way contradicts the hermeneutics and genealogy, as explained above. The normative critical theory should conduct its reflections on human flourishing and its critique of the existing forms of consciousness against the background of the material contradictions of the economic structures of the existing forces and relations of production. What are these contradictions and tensions today?

The two biggest challenges today are a looming ecological crisis and the rapid technological advancement in artificial intelligence (AI). Ever since the inception of industrial capitalism in the 18th century, the exponential growth of capital and its increasing concentration have relied on fossil fuel. Market competition makes capitalist producers compete for consumers, which results in the rapid growth of consumption. Capitalism, more than any other economic system, has raised millions of people out of poverty: in the centres of capitalist development, the poverty of industrial workers in the 19th century transformed into the relative prosperity of the 20th century post-war capitalism. Consumption in the peripheries of the globe has also been growing, even if the poverty of those workers is similar to that of the 19th century Europe. The intrinsic irrationality of markets due to their ‘self-regulating’ nature provides no economic incentives to produce and consume less, and to abandon fossil fuels for good. This irrationality lies in the fact that private capital functions as an externalising machine which dumps its costs (including pollution) onto the public. Coupled with the human inability to decisively act on the danger that lies ahead in the distant future, capitalism has produced the material conditions for the future ecological disaster and, possibly, its own self-destruction.

Technological advancements in AI, its application to production in the form of (fully) automated tools, and a rapid growth of digital platforms pose the fundamental challenge to the capitalist mode of production. Marx himself was aware of the challenges of automated machinery for capitalism when, in the famous fragment on machines in *Grundrisse*, he claimed that capital “thus works towards its own dissolution as the form dominating production” (Marx 1993: 700). Marx’s analysis of the nature and workings of capitalist production relied on a commonly accepted premise: that, for capitalist production based on the extraction of the surplus value to exist, there must be an army of free bearers of labour power ready to sell it to the capitalists. Thus, the key condition of capitalism, as Marx and other classical political economists assumed, was that surplus value can be

⁶ For the argument against this charge and the interpretation of Marx’s account of ideology, see Bielskis, 2022.

produced only by buying wage labour essential for workers to survive. Although there is no consensus among the social theorists as to what share of contemporary jobs can be replaced by automation, some researchers estimate that up to 47 percent are susceptible (Frey 2020: 320). Even if the share of automatable jobs is smaller, given the current neo-liberal form of capitalism – two of the main features of which are wage-compression and credit-driven consumption – the drive of the capital to replace living labour has continued and will continue to pose both theoretical and practical questions. Can the capitalist relations of production survive the rapid changes in the forces of production? If they cannot, what form of economic production will follow? More importantly, what will automation mean for the ordinary citizens of (democratic) societies and their flourishing? Attempting to answer these questions is indeed one of the tasks of the normative critical theory spelt out in this paper.

Conclusion

Marx and those who followed him initiated the critical theory as an alternative paradigm for social and human sciences. Its main premise was the idea that the social theory should not only describe and analyse social reality. It must also draw on the emancipatory aspects and criticise the society in their terms. Marx thought that the social theory presupposed a critique of the *status quo*: the presently existing power relations and social structures of the capitalist modernity. The question that he never explicitly articulated was on what normative ground the critique of the capitalist social order should be advanced. Apart from his appeal to the quasi-Aristotelian-Hegelian concept of species being, and, possibly, the Kantian notion of freedom, Marx never provided an answer to this question. Thus, his normative concepts of freedom and of species-being as ethical ends and their political implications were left implicit and undertheorised. MacIntyre (1998), therefore, was right to argue that Marx, by turning to political economy and following his own reflections in *Theses on Feuerbach*, turned away from philosophy too early. The consequence of turning away from philosophy was the lack of ethical reflections on the human good. The 11th thesis on Feuerbach – that, so far, philosophers have interpreted the world, but the goal is to change it – was correct in one respect: it urged the critical theory to focus on human emancipation. However, Marx's research in political economy (which Marx himself understood as necessary for "changing the world") distracted him from the articulation of normative foundations which would have opened the door to a more realistic reflection of the desired future society.

It is against this insight that the conception of the normative critical theory rooted in the substantive notion of human flourishing has been articulated in this paper. I have argued that Aristotelianism is important because it gives us philosophical and normative resources to articulate what individual and collective flourishing may be against the material conditions of our age. Central to this conception is normativity which is understood in terms of moral excellences as the dispositions of character necessary for the right ethical and political action. The theorisation of human flourishing and normativity requires

the hermeneutic engagement of critical theorists with the Aristotelian tradition, while genealogy may be used to critique the discursive and ideological forms of the dominant power structures. Given the material contradictions of the fossil fuel-driven capitalism and its techno-feudal tendencies, where a dozen digital platforms control most of the AI industry, the question that critical theory should pose is how to philosophically articulate the new forms of anti-capitalist life and its politics.

This is indeed a practical question, however, which cannot be answered here. Not only is it a question for future research, but it is also, possibly, a question for the generation(s) to come. This is so because it is impossible to answer it when removed from those forms of life which it aims to articulate. Hence, the anti-capitalist theory requires anti-capitalist practices and alternative forms of life, and vice versa. It would mean imagining and conceptualising a form of life whose social relations of production and consumption were beyond the commodity fetishism. This would require organising and sustaining forms of collective life where wealth is not commodified – where, to paraphrase the first sentence of Marx's *Capital*, its simple form is not that of a commodity. The central thesis of this paper is that the conceptualisation of the normative critical theory demands us both to engage with the critique of contemporary forms of social, political, and cultural life under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism (something that the Frankfurt School theorists were good at in *their* own time), *and* – also – to engage in the anthropology and ethnography of the existing anti-capitalist, non-commodified forms of social life, and then theorise them.

References

- Andres, H.J., & Lohmann, H., 2008. *The Working Poor in Europe: Employment, Poverty and Globalization*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Aristotle, 1980. *The Nicomachean Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Aristotle, 2009. *Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bielskis, A., 2005. *Towards a Postmodern Understanding of the Political*. New York: Palgrave-Macmillan.
- Bielskis, A., 2012. The Political Implications of Alasdair MacIntyre's Claims of *Dependent Rational Animals*. *Problemos* 82: 85–98.
- Bielskis, A., 2015. Anti-Capitalist Politics and Labour for the Twenty-first Century: History and Future Challenges. In: *Virtue and Economy: Essays on Morality and Markets*, eds. A. Bielskis & K. Knight. London: Routledge, 229–248.
- Bielskis, A., 2018. On the Genealogy of Kitsch and the Critique of Ideology: A Reflection on Method. In: *Genealogy. The Special Issue: Political Genealogy after Foucault*, ed. M. Clifford. Basel, Switzerland, MDPI 2(1): 1–11.
- Bielskis, A., 2022. Against the Self-Images of Our Age: Questioning the Philosophy of Difference. In: *Practical Rationality and Human Difference: Perspectives on and beyond Alasdair MacIntyre*, eds. S. Maletta, et al. London: Mimesis International, 223–236.
- Foucault, M., 1991. On the Genealogy of Ethics: An Overview of Work in Progress. In: *The Foucault Reader*, ed. P. Rabinow. London: Penguin Books, 340–372.
- Frey, C. B., 2019. *The Technology Trap: Capital, Labor, and Power in the Age of Automation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Gadamer, H. G., 1989. *Truth and Method*. London: Sheed and Ward.
- Groff, R., 2015. On the Ethical Contours of Thin Aristotelian Marxism. In: *Constructing Marxist Ethics*, ed. M. J. Thompson. Leiden: Brill.

- Graeber, D., 2018. *Bullshit Jobs: A Theory*. New York: Simon & Shuster.
- Honneth, A., 2008. Reification and Recognition: A New Look at an Old Idea. In: *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*, ed. M. Jay. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17–96.
- Horkheimer, M., 1993. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
- Horkheimer, M., 2002. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. New York: Continuum.
- Horkheimer, M., and Adorno, Th. 2002. *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.
- Knight, K., 1996. Revolutionary Aristotelianism. In: *Contemporary Political Studies*, Vol. 2: 885-896.
- Knight, K., 2007. *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Lukács, G., 1971. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. London: Merlyn Press.
- MacIntyre, A., 1981. *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.
- MacIntyre, A., 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* London: Duckworth.
- MacIntyre, A., 1996. The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken. In: *The MacIntyre Reader*, ed. K. Knight. Cambridge: Polity Press, 223–234.
- MacIntyre, A., 1998. *A Short History of Ethics*. London: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, A., 2009. *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Selected Writings 1953-1974*, eds. P. Blackledge & N. Davidson. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books.
- Mann, Th., 1994. *Buddenbrooks: The Decline of a Family*. New York: Vintage Book.
- Marx, K., 1988. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. New York: Prometheus books.
- Marx, K., 1992. *Capital*. Vol. I. London: Penguin.
- Marx, K., 1993. *Grundrisse*. London: Penguin Classics.
- Marx, K., 2008. *On the Jewish Question*, available at: Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/jewish-question> [accessed: 2022-10-01].