Wills, Vanessa Christina. *Marx's Ethical Vision*. New York: Oxford University Press 2024, xv + 303 pp.

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G. A. Cohen may have been an excellent philosopher. He was an even better comedian. And so, the philosophical context for Vanessa Wills' *Marx's Ethical Vision* (2024) is best made sense of with Cohen's sketch "Marxist Boxing Match: Roemer vs. Habermas" (available on Youtube). The contenders: John 'the Kid' Roemer from Davis, California, with his impeccable suit vs. Jürgen Habermas, 'old Jürgy-Bürgy,' with 400 books and 718 articles in 46 UN-recognized languages.

Cohen's Habermas stands for a Marxism that finds in Marx a distinctive yet defensible — namely dialectical — method as well as an ethical vision based broadly on the value of human flourishing. Cohen's Roemer represents analytical Marxism which ridicules dialectical methodology as incomprehensible nonsense and has little patience for Marx's confusing ethics. For, over the course of his life, Marx calls for human development towards "rich individuality" (MECW 15:251), yet writes that "communists do not preach morality at all" (MECW 5:247), but preaches the alienating, enslaving, and dehumanizing character of capitalism (MECW 35). Analytical Marxists do not bother making sense of these inconsistencies and instead wrap Marx into the tight blanket of twentieth-century egalitarianism until he would pass as one of John Rawls' (more boring) Harvard colleagues.

Habermas wins Cohen's fictional boxing match. And this Habermas would also be Wills' hero. Her book has two main goals: to show that Marx has "a single, coherent ethical perspective that

evolves and deepens over the course of his intellectual life" (2), and to emphasize "the central role of dialectics" within this perspective (38). She meets these goals admirably clearly and comprehensively. It is only a little disappointing that she entirely overlooks Habermas and the Frankfurt School whom her Marx-interpretation may have much in common with. Instead, she engages with recent anglophone Marxists like Allen Wood and Philip Kain and with European heavyweights like Louis Althusser and Eduard Bernstein. And she anyway concentrates on a comprehensive review of Marx's oeuvre, including his little read doctoral dissertation on Democritus and Epicurus, as well as his polemic against Max Stirner, often eliminated from shortened English editions of the *German Ideology*. Out comes not only Marx's ethical vision according to Wills but also: Wills' ethical vision and the ethical vision that Wills believes will motivate us all to fight capitalism and bring about communism.

What is this vision? "Man is the highest being for man," writes Marx (MECW 3: 182; Wills 72). That is, man ought to do what promotes man's flourishing. What that is depends on what sort of being man is — ethics supervenes on anthropology. But the anthropology we get is not static and natural but changing and social. "Human beings are essentially social beings who produce their own existence through conscious, purposive activity in the labor process," Wills writes (72). What distinguishes us from animals is that, unlike spider or bee, we are capable of "conscious life activity" (MECW 3:276; see also MECW 35:188): rather than having to blindly follow our instincts, we can make deliberate plans and subsequently execute them through our labor. While this capacity for conscious life activity is a natural trait of human beings, its purposes are often social: it is employed to satisfy social needs that arise only under historically specific conditions. Wills gives the need for solidarity as an example: this "brotherhood of man" was first only a means to an end, yet as (to follow Marx's example) French workers were "smoking, drinking, eating" together, "a new need — the need for society" emerged (Wills 62; MECW 3:313). It is because one ought to do what is necessary to satisfy existing needs and because these needs can be social and therefore contingent, that morality — what humans ought to do — is also contingent.

Eventually, material conditions reach a particular level — and capitalism has unlocked this level — at which the social need for "rich individuality" emerges. Wills refers to it as "the highest aim for human beings" according to Marx (127). A person becomes a rich individual in the relevant sense when they are "liberated from abject dependency on other people and yet fully, consciously, and enthusiastically interdependent with them" (121). They are fully self-determined within a group of fully self-determining others. For Wills, communism will bring about rich individuality for everyone. And so, once the need for rich individuality has emerged, we ought to bring about communism.

This, at its core, is Marx's ethical vision as reconstructed and endorsed by Vanessa Wills. It begins from human conscious life activity understood as human labor to satisfy human needs. It clarifies that these needs can be social. It finds the social need for rich individuality in capitalism — and derives from the general imperative that human needs ought to be satisfied the specific imperative in favor of communism. Subsequent chapters add layers around this core: alienation is the reverse of this ethical ideal (chapter 4). Wills sees no difference in normativity between early (where alienation is explicitly mentioned) and late (where the terminology changes to 'fetishism,' 'dehumanization,' and 'exploitation') Marx. Then, Wills defends the compatibility of freedom and determinism against those who read Marx as a strict economic determinist (chapter 5). Processes of economic determination and human self-creation condition one another — out comes a distinctively Marxist (or dialectical) brand of compatibilism. It allows Wills to show that Marx's ethical ideal can give rise to a genuine moral ought connected to moral responsibility and the possibility of acting otherwise. Marx further criticizes bourgeois morality centered around values of negative

freedom or equal right (chapter 7) and accuses common approaches to morality (Christian, utilitarian, Kantian, Malthusian) of functioning ideologically in the service of capitalism (chapter 8). Finally, Wills must explain what Marx meant when he wrote that communism would abolish morality (MECW 6:504) (chapter 9). She needs to reconcile the amoral nature of communism with the moral character of that very communist who announces this amoral nature. Her strategy: since morality is a system of unrealized ought statements, and since these oughts are *realized* in communism, communism will be free from morality by definition. Previous reviewers have already taken issue with this reconciliation-attempt (Kandiyali forthcoming; Brixel forthcoming; Ben-Meir 2024); I want to focus on three different questions: First, does Marx really have a single ethical vision? Second, should we endorse it? Third, does it help against capitalism? In all three cases, I am skeptical.

First, Wills ascribes to Marx an "ethical vision" (49), an "ethical perspective" (12), an "ethical theory" (1), a "morality" (13), a "moral philosophy" (14). She uses these terms interchangeably — but what do they mean? Unfortunately, Wills does not offer a definition. So here is my best reconstruction. We begin with Wills' definition of ethical reasoning: "To reason about what the life of our species ought to be, about what we ought to do, and about how we ought to treat one" (12). Having an ethical vision requires previous ethical reasoning. It also requires having reached a particular conclusion in this reasoning, a conclusion of which Wills additionally demands that it must be "single" and "coherent" (2). That is, to have an ethical vision one must be able to answer all questions about what life ought to be, what we ought to do, and how we ought to treat one another with reference to a single principle or theory and without making contradictory recommendations.

I find it difficult to read the late Marx, especially *Capital*, as an expression of the same, single ethical vision that can more easily be found in his earlier works. Where Marx uses moral or ethical language in *Capital*, it is mostly negative language, condemning the status quo rather than describing a future ideal. Frequently, these statements of condemnation have a distinctive style: the chiasmus. "It is not the workman that employs the instruments of labor, but the instruments of labor that employ the workman" (MECW 35:426) is just one example of such rhetorical inversion. Marx observes how capital turns workers into automatons or beasts of burden while it prioritizes the well-being of actual machines. Now, such condemnations are compatible with the ideal of rich individuality: what Marx would have to say against workers' machine-like existence under capitalism is that such existence is not rich individuality. But this sounds odd. Surely, what is wrong with workers' machine-like existence is that it does not even meet a minimal threshold of human dignity, not that it fails to precisely fit some lofty aspiration. *Capital* can do without the ideal of rich individuality. What is more, by integrating *Capital* into a unified ethical vision with rich individuality at its helm, Wills turns it into a book for fewer people than Marx may have intended it to be. Now, it can appeal only to those who share Marx's specific ethical vision rather than to the many who despise dehumanization.

This raises a second question: should we endorse this vision? More specifically, does Wills' Marx give us the epistemic resources that would entitle us to endorse it? Wills said that capitalism creates the need for rich individuality. But she said little about how it does so. Rich individuality is a complex need, it is unclear how exactly it could be met, what social relations could combine the freedom and the interdependence it calls for. If we are not clear about what would satisfy this need, can we have it as a genuine need at all? What is more, capitalism, rather than creating *new* needs, seems to crush old ones, especially for workers. Under the capitalism Marx describes, workers live such deprived and dehumanized lives that it is hard to imagine them thinking beyond their immediate needs for food, drink, or shelter to such elaborate needs as rich individuality. Is rich individuality then really a need that emerges in capitalism? Or is it rather an ideal that Marx *brings to* cap-

italism? This latter claim chimes with Wills' calling rich individuality the "highest aim for human beings" (127), "sophisticated forms of human interaction" (64). If rich individuality were merely another need that emerged from contingent social circumstances, it would not deserve such praise and rank. So where does this thought of rich individuality as the highest good come from?

If it is not a social need of capitalism but nevertheless a need in capitalism, rich individuality must arise from timeless human nature. Wills presents two methods with which Marx homes in on human nature: first, a comparison with non-human animals, second, a survey of human history. Wills praises these as scientific methods, superior to wild inventions that "human beings are necessarily or ineluctably selfish, altruistic, competitive, fallen, vicious, or any other of a whole host of characterizations that other theories have posited as necessary and permanent features of human nature" (54–55). Yet, neither scientific method works for rich individuality. Rich individuality has never been realized in human history. It was not even a need for most of that history; human beings were largely content to fit into their families and tribes, as Marx outlines (MECW 28:18). This also means that a comparison with non-human animals will not deliver rich individuality as part of human nature: it does not distinguish humans from animals because it is not something that humans have but animals do not.

Where does rich individuality come from if it is neither a social need nor a part of human nature? If we cannot find a good origin for it, we cannot endorse it. Add to this the staple Marxist idea that material existence determines consciousness and the trouble deepens: the ideal of rich individuality now looks like a product of capitalism, for it is within capitalism that Marx conceived of it. At least the ideal is not bourgeois ideology — while having arisen within capitalism, it does not also support capitalism. On the contrary, it urges the abolition of capitalism and the creation of a communist society in which we can all be rich individuals. In Wills' terminology, it is then a piece of proletarian ideology: also the product of existing class society but reflecting the interests of the proletariat. Now, however, the ideal of rich individuality starts to look like little more than clever propaganda in the service of proletarian revolution. Why should that be what everyone ought to promote? Wills will want to claim with Marx that the proletarian revolution is not only in the interest of the proletariat but in the universal interest. How can she do that? An argument will be difficult to give since we just saw how the obvious ways of giving it (arguing that rich individuality is a social need or a part of human nature) fail. The ideal of rich individuality stands on shaky epistemic ground. Perhaps, this is how it has to be. Perhaps, normative foundations are always at least a little shaky. But that should not be glossed over, it should be bravely admitted.

Third, does Wills' ethical vision help fight capitalism? It may deliver moral arguments against capitalism when it finds needs that capitalism cannot satisfy. But will these arguments be *effective*? Will they motivate large numbers of people to join the fight against capitalism? Marx condemns the socialists who came before him for their naivety, for genuinely believing that the right moral arguments would convince capitalists to give up their enormous wealth and to join the revolution of their workers. So what role, if any, can moral argument play in the revolution? It may convince the rare capitalist, it may help keep the ranks of revolutionaries united, but the majority of people will remain unmoved by it. Arguments from self-interest will likely fare better. This is what Marx claims and what Wills endorses. But would she have written 293 pages on Marx's ethical vision if she did not at least hope he was wrong? "We can align ourselves with working people's struggles for freedom and human survival, today" (236) — Wills wants to animate her readers, yet she must simultaneously accept that her animations can only go so far.

Wills sees her book as "scholarship and struggle" (243). It seems to me that wanting it to be both leads exactly to the three problems I have identified. A book of and for political struggle would do well to, first, present a strong and unified ethical vision, second, to downplay any epistemic

difficulties, and, third, to use this vision to motivate its audience for the struggle. A book of scholarship, on the other hand, can say more about possible diversions from the single ethical vision Wills attributes to Marx, it can acknowledge epistemic difficulties, and accept the limits of moral argument. Wills may find it important to do both scholarship and struggle, but doing both in one go comes at a cost.

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