

Marx's Critique of Heaven and Critique of Earth

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In recent years the intelligent design movement, or creationism in a more subtle guise, has expanded the attack on the teaching of evolution in U.S. public schools, while promoting an ambitious “Wedge strategy” aimed at transforming both science and culture throughout society. As explained in our book Critique of Intelligent Design: Materialism versus Creationism from Antiquity to the Present (Monthly Review Press, 2008), this has reignited a 2,500-year debate between materialism and creationism, science and design. The argument from design (the attempt to discern evidence of design in nature, thereby the existence of a Designer) can be dated back to Socrates in the fifth century BCE. While the opposing materialist view (that the world is explained in terms of itself, by reference to material conditions, natural laws, and contingent, emergent phenomena, and not by the invocation of the supernatural) to which Socrates was responding also dates back to the fifth century BCE in the writings of the atomists Leucippus and Democritus. The latter perspective was developed philosophically into a full-fledged critique of design by Epicurus in the third century BCE, which later influenced the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century.

Today's intelligent design proponents like William Dembski, senior fellow of the Seattle-based Discovery Institute's Center for Science and Culture, continually affirm that the philosophical foundations of the materialist views they oppose can be traced back to Epicurus in antiquity (“all roads,” Dembski observes, echoing Epicurus's first century BCE Roman follower Lucretius, “lead to Epicurus and the train of thought he set in motion”). However, the three greatest materialist enemies of design in modern times are said to be Darwin, Marx, and Freud. It was Darwin who in a critique first used the term “intelligent design” in its modern sense, while Marx and Freud both developed materialist critiques of religion and design.

In attacking evolution and materialism, proponents of intelligent design emphasize that the world is too specified and irreducibly complex to have been the product of “pure chance.” In contrast, materialist-dialectical thinkers from antiquity to the present have

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argued that the world is ruled not by pure chance (or produced by strict mechanical determinism) but is characterized by contingency, i.e., historical deviations from structured conditions, leading over time to the emergence of qualitatively transformed phenomena: in Darwin's theory through a process of natural selection. From a materialist perspective the crucial point is that the world is not governed by divine teleology, "final causes," or a transcendent Logos, but is nonetheless intelligible in its own terms, emerging "without the aid of the gods" as Epicurus famously put it.

As recounted in chapter 5 of *Critique of Intelligent Design*, reprinted below, Marx from a very early age was deeply engaged with this debate as it was manifested in antiquity up through the nineteenth century. He therefore developed a critique of heaven as a precondition for a critique of earth. This has made him a principal nemesis for intelligent design proponents up to the present day.

—John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York

The Critique of Heaven

"Christianity," Karl Marx observed, "cannot be reconciled with reason [as embodied in Enlightenment science] because 'secular' and 'spiritual' reason contradict each other."¹ Marx was a strong critic of teleology and the argument from design, which he saw as alienated attempts to provide a rational basis in nature for God's dominion on earth, thereby justifying all earthly dominions. He sided with the materialist critique of intelligent design emanating from Epicurus, whom he called in his doctoral dissertation "the greatest representative of Greek Enlightenment."² Marx therefore stands next to Darwin and Freud as a target for today's intelligent design proponents—who trace the intellectual sins of all three ultimately to Epicurus.³

For Marx the critique of religion was the indispensable starting point for a broader critique of an "inverted world" for which religion was both the "general theory" and the "encyclopedic compendium." As he stated in 1844 in his "Introduction to a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right": "The criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics."⁴ It was the critique of religion that made philosophy and science (and with this the critique of political economy) possible. This also described the progression of Marx's own thinking.

Marx came from a mixed Jewish-Lutheran-deist heritage. Both of his maternal and paternal grandfathers were rabbis, and almost all of the rabbis of Trier from the sixteenth century on were his ancestors. But his

father, Heinrich Marx, converted to Lutheranism by 1817, the year before Marx's birth, so that he could continue his profession as a lawyer in the Prussian state, which would otherwise have barred him from employment. Heinrich Marx was to become a devoted deist, described by Edgar von Westphalen (Karl Marx's future brother-in-law) as a "Protestant *à la* Lessing." Heinrich Marx embraced the Enlightenment, could recite Voltaire and Rousseau by heart, and urged his son to "pray to the Almighty" and "to follow the faith of Newton, Locke and Leibniz." Not as much is known about the beliefs of Marx's mother, Henrietta. She seems to have been more attached to her Jewish beliefs, partly in deference to her parents, and was not baptized until 1825 (a year after Karl) upon the death of her father. The young Marx also came under the tutelage of the Baron Ludgwig von Westphalen (his future father-in-law) who introduced him early on to the ideas of the utopian socialist Saint-Simon.

Marx was educated at the Friedrich Wilhelm Gymnasium (High School) in Trier, a former Jesuit school in which four-fifths of the students were Catholic. In 1835 at the age of seventeen he was required to write three essays for his school-exit examination. One had to be devoted to a religious subject and Marx wrote on "The Union of Believers with Christ, According to John 15: 1-14, Showing its Basis and Essence, its Absolute Necessity, and its Effects." The paper presented the Lutheran Trinitarian argument on the necessity of the union with Christ as the goal of history. Marx concluded his paper by stating that "union with Christ bestows a joy which the Epicurean strives vainly to derive from his frivolous philosophy or the deeper thinker from the most hidden depths of knowledge." This early focus on Christ versus the Epicureans and other philosophers suggests that even as an adolescent Marx was already interested in Epicurus's materialism and its critique of design, pointing to his doctoral dissertation six years later on Epicurus in which he was to reverse the position of his early school paper and embrace the critique of design. Marx's school essay on religion was written in the same year as David Strauss published his *Life of Jesus*, which was to constitute the starting point of the Young Hegelian critique of religion (and the same year as the introduction of the railway into Germany).⁵

Following his early school papers, the next major extant record emanating from Marx's pen is his remarkable letter to his father, written from Berlin in November 1837. Here we find Marx struggling over the "grotesque craggy melody" of Hegel's philosophy, which he absorbed

completely but also resisted in part due to its idealistic content. "If previously the gods had dwelt above the earth," he wrote, "now [in Hegel] they became its centre." Here was a philosophy "seeking the idea in reality itself." But despite its obvious power over his thought, Marx felt that he had been delivered "into the arms of the enemy" and that he "had made an idol of a view" he "hated." At the same time he joined the Young Hegelian "Doctors' Club," which endlessly discussed Hegel's philosophy and the critique of religion.⁶

In the very midst of his struggles over Hegelian philosophy Marx turned to "positive studies," investigating the works of both Francis Bacon and the German natural theologian Hermann Samuel Reimarus. The long-term impact of Bacon on Marx's thinking cannot be doubted. Marx saw Bacon as the modern materialist counterpart of the ancient atomists Democritus and Epicurus.⁷ Marx and Darwin within a few years of each other in the late 1830s and early 1840s both explicitly adopted Bacon's anti-teleological view, drawn from the ancient materialists, that any concept of nature rooted in final causes was "barren, and like a virgin consecrated to God produces nothing."⁸ Marx was undoubtedly strongly influenced by Hegel's extensive treatment in his *History of Philosophy* of Bacon's critique of final causes (for example the notion that the bee is "provided with" a stinger for protection) as opposed to efficient causes. In presenting Bacon's critique of intelligent design, Hegel depicted him as the modern representative of an argument that "has the very merit [of opposing "superstition generally"] which we met with in the Epicurean philosophy."⁹

In this way, the great millennial struggle between materialism and idealism, between science and teleology, with regard to the interpretation of nature, impressed itself early on in Marx's thought via Bacon, and was reinforced by his studies of Hegel. The Enlightenment materialism of the eighteenth century, as Engels put it, "posited Nature instead of the Christian God as the Absolute confronting man." Such materialism derived from the rejection within science of both the argument from design of Christian religion and all idealistic theories that relied on teleological arguments. As Engels cogently expressed it:

"Did god create the world or has the world been in existence eternally?" The answers which the philosophers gave to this question split them into two great camps. Those who asserted the primacy of spirit to nature and, therefore, in the last instance, assumed world creation in some form or other—(and among the philosophers, Hegel, for example, this creation often becomes still more intricate and impossible than in

Christianity)—comprised the camp of idealism. The others, who regarded nature as primary, belong to the various schools of materialism. These two expressions, idealism and materialism, primarily signify nothing more than this; and here also they are not used in any other sense.¹⁰

If the issue of materialism versus idealism necessarily arose in Marx's 1837 studies of Bacon, this was no less true of his 1837 readings from Reimarus. Hermann Samuel Reimarus was best known in Marx's day for his posthumously published *Wolfenbüttel Fragments* of 1774–78, drawn from his *Apology, or Defense for the Reasonable Worshippers of God*. Representing a rationalist, deist criticism of the accuracy of biblical revelation with regard to Christ and a denial of his divinity (Reimarus called Christ a “secular savior”), the *Fragments* created a furor in Germany—not unlike the reception of David Strauss's *Life of Jesus* in the following century.¹¹ In his lifetime, however, Reimarus was known principally for his work on logic and—more significantly for Marx—for his two major works on natural theology and the instincts of animals: his 1754 *The Principal Truths of Natural Religion Defended and Illustrated, in Nine Dissertations: Wherein the Objections of Lucretius, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, La Mettrie, and Other Ancient and Modern Followers of Epicurus are Considered, and their Doctrines Refuted*; and his 1760 *Triebe der Thiere* or *Drives of Animals*.¹²

Reimarus was a follower of the English natural theologian John Ray and had written a brief treatise as early as 1725 promoting Ray's argument from design. The influence of Ray is evident throughout Reimarus's *Principal Truths of Natural Religion*. He transformed Ray's clock metaphor into a watch metaphor nearly half a century before William Paley more famously employed the watch metaphor in his *Natural Theology* (1802). As Reimarus wrote:

Suppose a Hottentot who knows nothing of the use of a watch, was shewn the inside, the spring, chain, wheels, in short, all its parts and the disposition of them; nay let him be instructed by a watch-maker, so that, in time, he may be able to make a watch; yet I affirm, that the Hottentot, if he is not made acquainted with the use of a watch, does not know what a watch is. He knows it not essentially; he is ignorant of its design and entire construction. For if the use of it had not been previously conceived in the mind of the artist who made a watch, as something sensible, such a machine would never have been made, nor have been disposed and constructed in such a manner.

Reimarus used this argument to infer that just as a watch was a machine designed by humanity for its own use, so the entire machinery

of the inanimate world must have been designed by God and for a purpose: for use by animate beings.¹³

The principal thrust of Reimarus's *Principal Truths of Natural Religion* was to counter the ancient Epicurean critique of intelligent design and its modern representatives. Thus he argued against Epicurean "blind chance" and in favor of God's "wisdom and design." The ultimate crime of Epicurus's philosophy, according to Reimarus, was to "banish God into the *Intermundia*," leaving him with no relation to the world. In the first five of the nine "dissertations" that made up this work Reimarus principally concerned himself with attacking Epicurus's own arguments, while in the remaining four dissertations he addressed the modern followers of Epicurus (such as Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, and La Mettrie). Arguing against the notion of the spontaneous creation of life from the earth, he declared in direct opposition to Epicurus's view: "The origin of men and other animals from the earth cannot be accounted for in a natural way. . . . [T]he earth has no title to be called the general mother of us all."¹⁴

It was in the fifth dissertation of his *Principal Truths of Natural Religion* that Reimarus most effectively advanced what he called the "general proof" of final causes, focusing on the innate drives of animals, and distinguishing these from human knowledge derived from experience. Animals, he argued, obtained the rationality evident in these innate drives directly from God rather than material causes. Writing, for example, of bees he stated: "Certainly no part of Nature shews greater appearances of a Superior Direction than the Bees, which not only form their sexangular cells in the most regular and just dimensions, but go about it as if they were well versed in the sublimest parts of geometry and fluxions." In contrast, "when men first come into the world, they have very few or no ideas, and have no skill or ability to put any plan in execution, but acquire them by invention and exercise. . . . attain[ed] only by repeated trials and long practice." Indeed, human beings have "for. . . many thousand years, been labouring with united strength in the invention of their arts, which have been but slowly brought to the present degree of perfection; and yet we cannot be said to execute what is necessary for our station in so perfect a manner as every animal, in its way, does immediately after its birth." For Reimarus this was sufficient to establish the truth that animals "owe all their skill to a superior Intelligence." Playing on the ancient materialist proposition, advanced most consistently by Epicurus, that "nothing comes from nothing," Reimarus argued that "from nothing, nothing can be conceived or

invented”—hence the innate drives of animals had to be attributed to “the over-ruling Wisdom of their Creator.”¹⁵

Six years later in his *Drives of Animals* Reimarus expanded this argument of the “fifth dissertation” of his *Principal Truths of Natural Religion* into a more general animal psychology. Here the argument from design is pushed further into the background and a more scientifically modeled argument is constructed, though Reimarus never abandoned his natural-theological views. “For the mature Reimarus, the explanation of animal behavior is not” to be found in “incorporeal knowledges implanted either by God or experience, but... innate physiological organizations called drives.” Consequently he has been called “the originator of the concept of drives” in psychology.¹⁶

Reimarus’s theory of drives was largely ignored by psychology until the twentieth century but had an important impact on Marx, who frequently employed the psychological component of Reimarus’s theory of drives in his own distinctions between human beings and animals. Inspired in part by Reimarus, Marx famously used the comparison of bees as natural architects to bring out the distinctiveness of human labor. “A spider conducts operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax.” It is clear that Marx, as he himself indicated, studied Reimarus closely, including his natural theology and his critique of Epicurean materialism: issues that were central to Marx’s analysis from the beginning.¹⁷ Marx, however, would have had little patience with Reimarus’s natural theology. Thus he was to refer with disdain to “the earlier teleologists” for whom “plants exist to be eaten by animals, and animals exist to be eaten by men.”¹⁸

Marx preferred Newtonian deism both to the natural theology of Reimarus’s *Principal Truths* and the “best of all possible worlds philosophy” of Leibniz. With regard to the famous seventeenth century debate between Samuel Clarke (representing Newton) and Leibniz, Marx clearly sided with Clarke/Newton’s greater adherence to scientific principle—writing “Bravo, old Newton!” in response to Newton’s position in his *Principia* (quoted in the *Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence*), in which he forcefully denied that God was “the soul of the world” as opposed to having dominion over souls as the “Universal Ruler.” Newton’s position was a partial recognition (in the natural realm) of the separation of the magisteria of science and religion.¹⁹

These concerns regarding materialism and design carry over into Marx's doctoral dissertation. His dissertation, *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature*, was completed and accepted in 1841. However, he began his work on it in 1839, when he commenced his seven notebooks on Epicurean philosophy. His dissertation also included an appendix, "Critique of Plutarch's Polemic Against the Theology of Epicurus," of which we have only a couple of fragments plus the notes to the appendix. (The last two chapters of the first part of the dissertation are also missing from the extant document, except for a part of the notes to the missing chapter 4.)

Marx's dissertation, despite its title, was concerned relatively little with the philosophy of Democritus, which was mainly a springboard for his analysis of Epicurus. As philosopher Paul Schafer has explained, "the dissertation's substantive core, that is, its atomist or materialist content, is Epicurean, while its analytical approach, that is, the dialectical method utilized to think those core ideas through, is Hegelian. The result is a fascinating hybrid that provides an illuminating picture of the genesis of Marx's philosophical view": the struggle between materialism and idealism that was to govern his thought. Marx strongly admired Epicurus's materialism, his "dialectical atomism" (as Schafer puts it), his critique of teleology and determinism, and above all his philosophy of freedom. Perhaps nothing so drew Marx to Epicurus as much as the latter's statements (strung together by Marx from ancient sources): "It is chance, which must be accepted, *not God*, as the multitude believe'.... 'It is a misfortune to live in necessity, but to live in necessity is not a necessity. On all sides many short and easy paths to freedom are open.... It is permitted to subdue necessity itself.'"²⁰

As Engels later wrote: "While classic Greek philosophy in its last forms—particularly in the Epicurean school—led to atheistic materialism, Greek vulgar philosophy led to the doctrine of a one and only God and of the immortality of the human soul."²¹ In the debates regarding natural science versus religion in his lifetime, Marx identified with the struggles and dilemmas that Epicurus confronted and the materialist, empiricist tradition to which he gave rise. Hence, Arend Th. van Leeuwen, a theologian, points out in relation to Marx's dissertation, "In a sense, Epicurus acts as Marx's double. Every time the name Epicurus is mentioned, we are to think of Marx reflecting his own problems in the mirror of Greek philosophy."²²

At the core of materialism was a critique of the notion that the rationality of the world was to be attributed to the gods. Hence, Marx's

doctoral dissertation on Epicurus was both a treatment of materialist dialectics and a critique of religion. In his “Foreword” to what was intended to be a published version of his thesis, Marx identified Epicurus with Prometheus (both bringers of light) and contended: “The confession of Prometheus: ‘In simple words, I hate the pack of gods’ [Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound*], is its [philosophy’s] own confession, its own aphorism against all heavenly and earthly gods who do not acknowledge human self-consciousness as the highest divinity. It will have none other beside.”

Justifying the inclusion of the appendix to his dissertation, Marx wrote: “If a critique of Plutarch’s polemic against Epicurus’ theology has been added as an appendix, this is because this polemic is by no means isolated, but rather representative of a species, in that it most strikingly presents in itself the relation of the theologising intellect to philosophy.” By attempting to promote the religious morality and the argument from design and to polemicize against Epicurus on those bases Plutarch had brought “philosophy before the forum of religion.” Marx went on to side explicitly with David Hume in declaring that philosophy with its rational approach to nature, and not the “theologising intellect” of natural theology, is the rightful king of the realm of reason.²³

Plutarch—who lived into the second century—was the senior of two priests of Apollo at the Oracle of Delphi and “a representative of religious Platonism during the early part of the Christian era.”²⁴ He was a strong critic of Epicurus, on the grounds that the latter had removed the necessary fear of God. It was terror of the afterlife that above all bound humanity to God. As Marx put it, Plutarch was a spokesperson for the doctrine that “justifies the terrors of the underworld for the sensuous consciousness....In fear, and specifically in an inner fear that cannot be extinguished, man is determined as an animal.” At the same time Plutarch advanced the argument of benign providence (even in the most terrible acts) as proof of God’s existence. For Plutarch, Epicurus was to be castigated for transforming the gods into distant beings comparable to the “Hyrcanian [Caspian Sea] fish” from which no harm or advantage could be obtained.²⁵

Marx’s critique of Plutarch both in the main text of his dissertation and in its appendix is thus of great importance in understanding his critique of religion, and in his response to the argument of design specifically. Marx had nothing but contempt for Plutarch, who, in addressing in his biography of Marius the battle between the Romans

and the German Cimbri tribes in 101 BCE near Vercelli, provided what Marx called “an appalling historical example” of how a religious morality rooted in the fear of all-powerful deities violated all conceivable humanity:

After describing the terrible downfall of the Cimbri, he relates that the number of corpses was so great that the Massilians [i.e., citizens of the Greek colony and city-state Massilia, now Marseilles] were able to manure their orchards with them. Then it rained and that year was the best for wine and fruit. Now, what kind of reflections occur to our noble historian in connection with the tragical ruin of those people? Plutarch considers it a moral act of God, that he allowed a whole, great, noble people to perish and rot away in order to provide the philistines of Massilia with a bumper fruit harvest. Thus even the transformation of a people into a heap of manure offers a desirable occasion for a happy reveling in [religious] morality!²⁶

Hence, for Plutarch a bumper crop of wine and fruit resulting from the rotting bodies of the vanquished Cimbri was itself an argument for the rationality of nature arising from divine providence. Plutarch's God was for Marx a “degraded God,” and Plutarch himself a spokesperson for “the hell of the populace.”

In refutation of Plutarch, Marx, in his appendix, rejected “proofs of the existence of God,” since these were in reality their opposite: “proofs of the existence of essential human self-consciousness.” Indeed, “the country of reason,” he declared, “is for God in general, a region in which he ceases to exist”—since this is the exclusive realm of humanity. Contra to Plutarch, Marx quotes from the French materialist and Epicurean Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature*: “Nothing...could be more dangerous than to persuade man that a being superior to nature exists, a being before whom reason must be silent and to whom man must sacrifice all to receive happiness.”

Both the later Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph von Schelling and Hegel come under attack in Marx's appendix for their theological views. Schelling is seen as abandoning his earlier conception of human freedom in concluding in his later work that God “is the real foundation of our cognition.” Hegel is condemned for turning all previous theological demonstrations “upside down” in order to try to demonstrate God's existence in the opposite fashion from traditional Christian theology. Previously natural accident and miracles were considered the proofs of God's existence. Now Hegel, in line with natural theology, purported to demonstrate the same thing with the reverse argument. Simply be-

cause “the accidental does *not* exist, God or the Absolute exists.” In other words, the proofs of God were to be found not in natural accidents or in miracles but in evidence of divine necessity.

Responding to such alleged proofs of God’s existence, including the argument from design, Marx pithily declared: “Lack of reason is the existence of God.” Conversely, the historical development of self-consciousness in the material world is the reasoned existence of humanity. “It is precisely Epicurus who makes the form of consciousness in its directness, the being-for-self, the form of nature. Only when nature is acknowledged as absolutely free from conscious reason [i.e., from the externally imposed rationality of a deity] and is considered reason in itself, does it become entirely the property of reason,” or the self-conscious world of humanity.²⁷

In this Marx broke sharply with Hegel himself, who had proclaimed in holy terms that his *Logic* was nothing but “the exposition of God as He is in His eternal essence before the creation of the world and man.”²⁸ At the heart of Hegel’s entire philosophy, Marx and Engels were to state in *The Holy Family*, was “the *speculative* expression of the Christian-Germanic dogma of the antithesis between *Spirit* and *Matter*, *God* and the *world*.” In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* Marx went so far as to label Hegel’s *Logic* a “*Santa Casa*” or “Holy House”—the name with which, as van Leeuwen pointed out, the Roman Catholic Inquisition in Madrid “sanctified its prison” and chamber of terror.²⁹

It has been customary to see Marx’s critique of religion and of Hegelian philosophical idealism as only developing as a result of his encounter with Ludwig Feuerbach’s prior critique of the Hegelian system. However, Marx’s critique of the “theologising intellect,” which was to find its most powerful expression in his introduction to *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* in 1844, was already essentially complete by the time he submitted his doctoral dissertation in early 1841—the very year that Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity* was published.³⁰ Moreover, Feuerbach’s *Preliminary Theses on the Reform of Philosophy*, which was to have a more direct impact on Marx’s thinking, did not appear until 1842. It would be more correct to argue, therefore, that Marx’s critique of religion developed independently of and alongside Feuerbach’s critique, which added force to Marx’s views.³¹

Nonetheless Feuerbach’s naturalistic rejection of Hegel’s idealist philosophy exerted a powerful influence on Marx. For Feuerbach, speculative philosophy in its most developed form, the Hegelian system, represented the alienation of the world of sensuous existence to

which human reason was materialistically bound. It replicated, in the name of philosophy rather than theology, the religious estrangement of human beings from nature. Hegel had presented the world as developing in inverted form “from the ideal to the real.” In contrast, “all science,” Feuerbach insisted, “must be grounded in *nature*. A doctrine remains a *hypothesis* as long as it has not found its *natural basis*. This is true particularly of the *doctrine of freedom*. Only the new [materialist] philosophy will succeed in *naturalizing* freedom which was hitherto an *anti-hypothesis*, a *supernatural hypothesis*.”³²

Marx's *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, which was published in 1844 in Paris in the *Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher* (*German-French Annals*), has been called “the Magna Carta of the Marxist critique of religion.”³³ It is here that Marx famously declared:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again. But *man* is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is *the world of man*, state, society. This state and this society produce religion, which is an *inverted consciousness of the world*, because they are an *inverted world*....[Religion] is the *fantastic realization* of the human essence since the human essence has not acquired any true reality. The struggle against religion is therefore indirectly the struggle against *that world* whose spiritual *aroma* is religion.

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the *expression* of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the *opium* of the people.

Marx here demonstrates a real sympathy for religion “as the *expression* of real suffering” and as a necessary solace for the oppressed. The latter do not have the same access to other means of consolation, such as opium, available to the wealthy, and have not yet learned to revolt against the inverted world of which religion is the *fantastic* manifestation. Reversing the position that he adopted as an adolescent in his school paper on the “Union of the Faithful with Christ,” Marx argued that “the abolition of religion as the *illusory* happiness of the people is the demand for their *real* [material] happiness.” “Thus the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth.”³⁴

The Critique of Earth

Marx's critique of religion was geared at all times to the needs of a humanist, materialist, and scientific understanding of the world. The

critique of religious alienation led to the critique of human-worldly alienation by means of two dialectical movements: (1) a critique derived from Epicurus and Feuerbach of religion as the alienation of the human world, and thus an inversion of human freedom—a critique that also extended from theology to idealist philosophy (as in the case of Hegel); and (2) a critique of purely contemplative materialism/humanism as empty abstractions, insofar as they were not simply presuppositions for a critique of earth (i.e., material-historical reality).

Hence, atheism itself, so long as it remained in the ether of Feuerbach's contemplative realm, was insufficient and devoid of genuine meaning, other than as a first step in the development of a humanist philosophy. Atheism as an ideal, Marx insisted, was "for the most part an abstraction." It was "a *negation of God*, through which negation it asserts the *existence of man*." It thus constituted mere "theoretical" humanism.³⁵

As a materialist, Marx opted *not* to invest in the abstraction of God and religion. At the same time he did not attempt to disprove the supernatural existence of God, since that transcended the real, empirical world and could not be answered, or even addressed, through reason, observation, and scientific inquiry. Instead he forged a practical atheism through his scientific commitment to a historical materialist approach for understanding reality in all of its dimensions. The practical negation of God and the affirmation of humanity and science demanded an active movement for revolutionary social change, the real appropriation of the world to pursue human development—the growth and expansion of human capabilities—and freedom.

Marx's critique of religion was thus never about the supernatural existence (even in negation) of God, but about the affirmation of the material world, the world of human beings, of reason and science—all of which required the displacement of "religion" as "the devious acknowledgement of man, through an intermediary."³⁶ Thomas Dean was therefore correct when he wrote in his *Post-Theistic Thinking* that,

Agreeing with the Aristotelian and Hegelian observation that contraries belong to the same genus, Marx views atheism as nothing more than an ideological contrary to religion. Hence it does not lead to a radical break with a religious way of thinking. Atheism looks more like a "last stage of theism, a negative recognition of God" than the theoretical foundation for a positive, this-worldly philosophy of man. It gives rise inevitably to the desire to supplant the God thus denied by a correspondingly elevated or deified concept of man....It is only by a second

act of transcendence, by transcending the mediation of humanism via atheism, “which is, however, a necessary presupposition,” that the possibility opens up of a “positive humanism, humanism emerging positively from itself.” The basis of Marx’s atheism and of his secular metaphysics is not therefore a set of philosophical arguments or speculative disproofs of the existence of God. That would be an ideological foundation as theological in character as theology itself. It is, rather, an independently formulated humanism that stands in immediate or unmediated fashion on its own feet.³⁷

Marx’s dialectical position that viewed religion as the source of “an illusory happiness,” made necessary by the impossibility of “real happiness,” meant that it was possible to recognize the alienated humanity in religion itself. Thus he was capable of not only referring to religion as “the heart of a heartless world,” but also of making such statements as: “After all we can forgive Christianity much, because it taught us the worship of the child.”³⁸ Compared to this, as Marx observed in his *Theses on Feuerbach*, a crude atheism that sought to establish itself alongside traditional religion “as an independent realm in the clouds” had relatively little to offer. The critique of religion was therefore socially meaningful only to the extent that it went beyond abstract atheism and contemplative materialism and gave rise to an atheism on the ground rooted in “revolutionary practice.”³⁹

Marx’s early critique of religion and of speculative philosophy was to form the basis of his later critique of ideology, specifically the ideology of bourgeois society. Ideology thus became a more general case of the same inversion of ideas and the material world that characterized the alienated condition of religion: “The ruling ideas,” Marx and Engels wrote in the *German Ideology* echoing Marx’s earlier critique of the “theologising intellect,” “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas.”⁴⁰

Marx often referred to the Protestant Reformation, and specifically Lutheranism in the German context, as representing the new religious garment that clothed the rising bourgeois society. Thus he ironically pointed to Martin Luther’s argument on the existence of a universal world of plunder as evidence of God’s design. As Luther himself put it, “God uses knights and robbers as his devils to punish the injustice of merchants.” In this way, according to Luther, “unchristian thieving and robbing” on all sides could be seen as pointing to the eventual coming to be of “God’s final word.” Thus for Luther—as Marx clearly meant his

readers to understand—God’s rationality was displayed even in what Hobbes had called “the war of all against all” of bourgeois society.

In Marx’s *Capital*, money, commodities, and capital itself were all seen as taking on the form of God in bourgeois society; while profit, rent, and interest formed a new “Trinity.” Marx compared the “fetishism that attaches itself to the products of labour” to the “misty realm of religion” where “the products of the human brain appear as autonomous figures endowed with a life of their own.”⁴¹ The parallels between the critique of religion and the critique of capital in Marx’s thought are thus endless.

Yet, Marx also continued to confront religion (including the argument from design) more directly due to its intrusions in the realms of morality and science. Morality was to be judged not in either foundationalist or relativist terms, but in terms of radical historicism, where moral conditions evolve with the material needs of human communities—a view that could be traced to Epicurus. There was no ultimate, divine moral order for society. Marx therefore attacked all notions of “mystical tendency, the providential aim...providence.” He rejected all foundationalist morality emanating from religious final causes, insisting instead that human beings were “the actors and authors of their own drama.”⁴²

Denouncing narrow religious morality and its effects on the development of political economy, Marx observed in *Capital* that “most of the population theorists are Protestant clerics...Parson Wallace, Parson Townsend, Parson Malthus and his pupil, the arch-Parson Thomas Chalmers, to say nothing of lesser reverend scribblers in this line.... With the entry of ‘the principle of population’ [into political economy], the hour of the Protestant parsons struck.”⁴³ The main objection to such thinkers was that they had departed from the principles of science by allowing the arguments of natural theology and religious morality to intrude into the science of political economy, as part of a defense of the ruling-class order. “The Malthusian theory,” the young Engels wrote in 1844, was “the economic expression of the religious dogma of the contradiction of spirit and nature and the resulting corruption of both.”⁴⁴ In his 1786 *Dissertation on the Poor Laws* Reverend Joseph Townsend, as Marx noted in the *Grundrisse*, supplemented fear as a motive for Christian religion with hunger as a motive for bourgeois industry (both constituting evidence of natural law and God’s design). “Hunger,” Townsend wrote, “is not only a peaceable, silent, unremitting pressure, but, as the most natural motive to industry and labour, it calls forth the most powerful exertions.”⁴⁵

For Marx, Malthus, like Townsend before him, was guilty of “clerical fanaticism.”⁴⁶ Although Malthus’s arguments were presented as scientific, they nonetheless invoked God as the final cause and promoted God’s will and Christian morals as the justification for the elimination of the Poor Laws. The general anger of the working classes towards Malthus and his natural theology (raised to the level of economic science) was best expressed by the political radical William Cobbett, who, in the same general spirit as Marx, said of Malthus: “I have during my life, detested many men; but never any one so much as you.... No assemblage of words can give an appropriate designation of you; and, therefore, as being the single word which best suits the character of such a man, I call you *Parson*, which amongst other meanings, includes that of *Borough-monger Tool*.”⁴⁷

In contrast to these objections to Malthus, Marx strongly defended the scientific character of Adam Smith’s economics against the criticisms of theologian and political economist Thomas Chalmers who considered Smith to have rejected the Christian view in his close connection to Hume (who was influenced by Epicurus’s materialism) and in his concept of unproductive labor, which Chalmers viewed as an attack on God’s clergy. In his political economic writings, Marx argued, Chalmers allowed religion and God, complete with “Christian priestly trimmings,” to intrude directly into science. “The parsonic element is...in evidence not only theoretically but also practically, since this member of the Established Church defends it ‘economically’ with its ‘loaves and fishes’ and the whole complex of institutions with which this Church stands or falls.”⁴⁸

The Death of Teleology

The materialist conception of nature and the materialist conception of history were for Marx the two indispensable bases of modern science. Human history and natural history ultimately constituted a single historical frame of reference. He therefore consistently advanced evolutionary views against all notions of design by a deity. Life, he contended, had originated in the world in accordance with some kind of spontaneous generation. He argued together with Engels in *The German Ideology* in 1846 that organic existence could not be understood in teleological terms, but involved “the bitterest competition among plants and animals” in which the relation of species to natural conditions was the material cause. And he early on adopted the conception of deep time arising from historical geology.⁴⁹

Marx's admiration for Darwin's evolutionary theory is well-known. He was reported as speaking of nothing else for months after the publication of the *Origin of Species*. Upon reading Darwin's work shortly after it appeared Marx wrote to Ferdinand Lasalle: "It is here that, for the first time, 'teleology' in natural science is not only dealt a mortal blow but its rational meaning is empirically explained."⁵⁰ His only criticism of Darwin was that by drawing on Malthus for inspiration in developing his theory of natural selection he had inadvertently given credence within the social realm to the Malthusian doctrine, which had espoused Christian morality, natural theology, and bourgeois justifications of the division of class and property. Hence, Marx and Engels sought at all times to separate Darwinian theory from Malthusianism or social Darwinism, while adhering to a materialist/humanist science, seeking to further human freedom.

In place of Malthus's abstract law of population, which was meant to justify class relations, Marx turned increasingly to the new field of anthropology in order to develop a historical, materialist, and scientific understanding of the development of human populations and societies in all of their aspects. He pointed out that, just as Darwin had referred to the organs developed by species as a kind of "natural technology," the result of natural selection, so too were human tools an extension of the organs of human beings and the product of social evolution. Did not the evolution of the tools of human beings provide then an approach to the evolution of human society that required "equal attention? And would not such a history be easier to compile, since, as Vico says, human history differs from natural history in that we have made the former, but not the latter?"⁵¹

Significantly, at the very time that Darwin was introducing his theory of evolution by natural selection, a second, no less serious, assault on the biblical view of the world was taking place. The year 1859, the date of the publication of Darwin's *Origin*, also marked the beginning of what has been called the "revolution in ethnological time."⁵² Although Neanderthal remains had been discovered in 1856, it took time for naturalists to realize exactly what they were. The discovery of prehistoric human remains in Brixham cave near Torquay in southwestern England in 1859 served as conclusive scientific evidence that human beings had existed on earth in great antiquity.⁵³ This extended the human time line far beyond recorded history, contradicting the view based on the Bible that humanity had existed at most only a few thousand years. Suddenly scientists were faced with evidence that human

beings had evolved over a period of time much longer than biblical literalists allowed for the history of the earth. Biologists and geologists closely associated with Darwin, such as John Lubbock and Thomas Huxley, began to consider the question of human evolution, relying in part on what was being revealed of the prehistoric record.

Lubbock built his work on Epicurus/Lucretius's distinction of the stone, bronze, and iron ages. Meanwhile, Lewis Henry Morgan introduced his pioneering work in anthropology, *Ancient Society*, based principally on his studies of the Iroquois—tracing the roots of his own evolutionary perspective to Lucretius.⁵⁴ Much of Marx's research for the remainder of his life, after the publication of *Capital*, volume 1, in 1867—even taking precedence over his economics—was devoted to wider ethnological studies as represented by his *Ethnological Notebooks* (1880–82). Marx's approach was built on Morgan's, in the sense of attempting to understand the full development of human productive and familial relations—recognizing that a genuine human anthropology of prehistory was now conceivable. It thus constituted an expansion of science's magisterium at the expense of the magisterium of religion.

Hence, although Marx devoted the greater part of his adult life to developing a critique of the regime of capital as a form of class-based production, this has to be seen as part of a much more fundamental materialist/humanist worldview that arose from his critique of religion. Like Hume, Marx was fond of referring not only to Lucretius but also to the later satirist (and Epicurean) Lucian (c. 120–c. 180) and his *Dialogues of the Gods*, in which, according to Marx, the gods died a second death due to comedy. And just as Hume had turned to Lucretius and Lucian on his deathbed, Marx's response to death, as recounted by Engels, was to quote Epicurus: “Death is not a misfortune for him who dies, but for him who survives.”

Indeed, Epicurus, Marx pointed out, argued that “the world must be *disillusioned* and especially freed from fear of gods, for the world is my *friend*.” Lucretius had written, “Things come into being without the aid of the gods.” Marx added that all human history, including the development of human nature, the formation of new needs, etc., is made by human beings as self-mediating beings of nature, *without the aid of gods*.⁵⁵

Notes

1. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1975), vol. 1, 190, 493–96. Spiritual reason, Marx went on to observe here, was “classically expressed” by the early Church father, Tertullian, who claimed “it is true because it is absurd.”

2. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 73.
3. Center for Renewal of Science and Culture, Discovery Institute, *The Wedge Strategy [Document]*, 1999, <http://www.antievolution.org/features/wedge.html>; Benjamin Wiker and Jonathan Witt, *A Meaningful World* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 15–16, 60.
4. Karl Marx, *Early Writings* (London: Penguin, 1974), 243–45.
5. David McLellan, *Karl Marx* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 1–16; Arend Th. van Leeuwen, *Critique of Heaven* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 40–43, 78; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 636–39; Sidney Hook, *From Hegel to Marx* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1962), 81.
6. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 10–21.
7. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 126–28; Arend Th. van Leeuwen, *Critique of Earth* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), 14–16.
8. Francis Bacon, *Philosophical Works* (New York: Freeport, 1905), 473; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 201; Charles Darwin, *Notebooks, 1837–1844* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1987), 637.
9. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), vol. 3, 184–87.
10. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 419; Frederick Engels, *Ludwig Feuerbach and the Outcome of Classical German Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1941), 17, 21.
11. Charles H. Talbert, “Introduction,” Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1970), 1; Julian Jaynes and William Woodward, “In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: I. Reimarus Against the Epicureans,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. X, no. 1 (January 1974): 5–6.
12. The full German title of Reimarus's 1760 *Drives of Animals* was: *Allgemeine Betrachtungen über die Triebe der Thiere, hauptsächlich über ihre Kunsttriebe, zur Erkenntnis des Zusammenhangs zwischen dem Schöpfer und uns selbst*.
13. Hermann Samuel Reimarus, *The Principal Truths of Natural Religion Defended and Illustrated, in Nine Dissertations: Wherein the Objections of Lucretius, Buffon, Maupertuis, Rousseau, La Mettrie, and Other Ancient and Modern Followers of Epicurus are Considered, and their Doctrines Refuted* (London: B. Law, 1766), 117–20, 152, 220.
14. Reimarus, *Principal Truths of Natural Religion*, 76, 84, 242.
15. Reimarus, *Principal Truths of Natural Religion*, 156–57, 229–34, 250–51.
16. Jaynes and Woodward, “In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: I. Reimarus Against the Epicureans,” 4; Julian Jaynes and William Woodward, “In the Shadow of the Enlightenment: II. Reimarus and His Theory of Drives,” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, vol. X, no. 2 (April 1974), 154.
17. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1976), 283–84; Marx, *Early Writings*, 328–29; van Leeuwen, *Critique of Earth*, 20, 53. The importance that Reimarus assumed among the Young Hegelians is evident in the work of Strauss, who wrote a major study on Reimarus's *Apology*, in which he declared “all positive religions without exception are works of deception.” David Strauss, “Hermann Samuel Reimarus and His Apology,” in Reimarus, *Reimarus: Fragments*, 46.
18. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 79.
19. See Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Ex Libris* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1967), 127; Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz and Samuel Clarke, *The Leibniz-Clarke Correspondence* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1956), 166; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 190.
20. Paul M. Schafer, “Introduction,” in Schafer, ed., *The First Writings of Karl Marx* (Brooklyn, New York: Ig Publishing, 2006), 45; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 43. For a

general discussion of Marx's relation to Epicurus see John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), 32–65.

21. Frederick Engels, "Bruno Bauer and Early Christianity," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Marx and Engels on Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 197.
22. van Leeuwen, *Critique of Heaven*, 74.
23. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 29–31.
24. van Leeuwen, *Critique of Heaven*, 77.
25. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 51, 74–75, 91, 448, 508–09.
26. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 84.
27. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 102–05, 446–48, 509.
28. Quoted in Hook, *From Hegel to Marx*, 17.
29. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, 85; van Leeuwen, *Critique of Heaven*, 195.
30. Ernst Bloch contended that "The First and Eleventh Theses on Feuerbach are already present *in statu nascendi* in the references to Epicurus" in Marx's dissertation. See Bloch, *Karl Marx* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 156.
31. The relation of Marx to Feuerbach is more complex when one considers that Feuerbach in his *History of Modern Philosophy* had dealt in detail with Gassendi's resurrection of Epicurus, and that this had influenced Marx in the writing of his dissertation. See Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 1, 94.
32. Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Fiery Brook* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), 161, 172, 198; Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 68–71.
33. van Leeuwen, *Critique of Heaven*, 12.
34. Marx, *Early Writings*, 243–45.
35. Marx, *Early Writings*, 357.
36. Marx, *Early Writings*, 218.
37. Thomas Dean, *Post-Theistic Thinking: The Marxist-Christian Dialogue in Radical Perspective*; (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1975), 69.
38. Marx quoted in Eleanor Marx, "Karl Marx: A Few Stray Notes," in Institute of Marxism-Leninism, *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, no date), 253.
39. Marx, *Early Writings*, 421–23.
40. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 59.
41. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3 (London: Penguin, 1981), 448–49, 953–56; Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 165.
42. Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991); Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 6, 170, 173; Epicurus, *The Epicurus Reader* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1994), 35.
43. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 766–77, 800.
44. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 439.
45. Townsend quoted in Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: Penguin, 1973), 845.
46. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, 605.
47. Cobbett quoted in Kenneth Smith, *The Malthusian Controversy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951).
48. Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), part 1, 299–300; part 3, 56–57.
49. See Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 117–26; Marx, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 471–73.
50. Karl Liebknecht, "Reminiscences of Marx," in Institute of Marxism-Leninism, *Reminiscences of Marx and Engels*, 106; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 41, 232, 246–47.

51. Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, pp. 461, 493; Darwin, *The Origin of Species* (London: Penguin, 1968), 187–88.
52. Thomas R. Trautmann, *Lewis Henry Morgan and the Invention of Kinship* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 35, 200; Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 212–21.
53. Jacob W. Gruber, "Brixham Cave and the Antiquity of Man," in Melford E. Spiro, ed., *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1965), 373–402. The significance of some of the early prehistoric human remains located in the nineteenth century (including those in the Neander Valley) was left in doubt at first due to the poor way in which these discoveries were excavated, deviating from the slow, careful process required by geological work, often failing to preserve the proper stratigraphic context, causing scientific observers to suspect that remains from distinct geological strata had been mingled with one another. In contrast, the excavation of the remains at Brixham cave were supervised by the Geological Society of London and hence for the first time definitively confirmed that human beings had existed on the earth in "great antiquity."
54. Trautmann, *Lewis Henry Morgan*, 32, 172–73.
55. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 5, 141–42; Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, vol. 3, 179; Foster, *Marx's Ecology*, 51–62; Frederick Engels, "Letter to Friedrich Adolph Sorge, March 15, 1883," in Philip S. Foner, ed., *Karl Marx Remembered* (San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1983), 26; István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1971), 162–89.

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The principle of historical specificity holds for psychology as well as the social sciences. Even quite intimate features of man's inner life are best formulated as problems within specific historical contexts. To realize that this is an entirely reasonable assumption, one has only to reflect for a moment upon the wide variety of men and women that is displayed in the course of human history...The human variety is such that no "elemental" psychologies, no theory of "instincts," no principles of "basic human nature" of which we know, enable us to account for the enormous human variety of types and individuals. Anything that can be asserted about man apart from what is inherent in the socio-historical realities of human life will refer mainly to the quite wide biological limits and potentialities of the human species. Within these limits and rising out of these potentialities, such a panorama of human types confronts us that to attempt to explain it in terms of a theory of "basic human nature" is to confine human history itself in some arid little cage of concepts about "human nature"—as often as not constructed from precise and irrelevant trivialities about mice in a maze.

—C. Wright Mills, "Psychology and Social Science," *Monthly Review*, October 1958.