The ethical work of Karl Marx

1. If ethics is taken to be, on the one hand, the negation of bourgeois ideology and morality and, on the other, as the intellectual and practical anticipation of the humanist values which are to govern relations among individuals in a world community freed from today's dominant alienating institutions (economic, political, ideological, etc.), then the work of Karl Marx may consequently be understood as an ethical act. As such, this work is one of the most important contributions to a radical transformation of mankind’s destiny: to humanity’s passage from the pre-human to the human stage, from human prehistory to history made by man.

2. As an ethical act, Marx’s work is based on scientific proof of the opportunity offered to mankind to choose between collective suicide, made possible by technical achievements which escape man’s rational control, and human self-realisation thanks to the reasonable use of the world’s resources and the technical advances of modern science.

3. As an ethical act, Marx’s teaching and practice was inspired by his view of the rapid cyclical development and expansion of the capitalist mode of production on a world scale, and thus of an increasing proletarianisation of the labouring masses, despite the immense progress in science and technics, and, finally, of mankind’s opportunity for material and intellectual emancipation. It is through a growing consciousness of this opportunity that the proletariat of the industrially developed countries was to constitute itself into political parties and “win the battle of democracy,” either legally, by universal suffrage, or by a revolutionary struggle, i.e. a general strike and the workers’ takeover of the means of production in view of self-management.

4. As an ethical act, Marx’s theory was offered to the most numerous and poorest class not as a definitive revelation of proletarian slavery and human emancipation but as an instrument for revolutionary self-education in the tradition of the teaching and practice of those great social reformers whose disciple Marx acknowledged to be. Marx, an insatiable reader and scholar, himself provided a definition of his intellectual and literary vocation, while admitting the limits of his theoretical originality, in this following confession to his daughter Laura: “You’ll certainly fancy,
my dear child, that I am very fond of books, because I trouble you with them at so unseasonable a time. But you would be quite mistaken. I am a machine condemned to devour them and then, throw them, in a changed form, on the dunghill of history” (Laura had just married Paul Lafargue and the two were spending their honeymoon in Paris; letter dated 11 April 1868, shortly after the publication of the first volume of Capital).

5. Marx, who was a disciple of Epicurus, Spinoza and Leibniz as well as of the French and English materialists, succeeded in constructing a world-view which he in no way considered as a new system of thought, nor as a new philosophy or a new science. He never asked that workers study Hegel’s Logic before attacking Capital. Although his master-work remained unfinished, it is perfectly understandable as a set of scientific and critical theses whose aim is to disclose “the economic law of motion of modern society” (Preface to Capital), and as a series of ethical norms and postulates derived from empirical observation of the self-emancipatory efforts and struggles of the modern slaves, the victims not of capitalists but of capital. The object of scientific analysis is the “reign of necessity”; the object of ethical vision is the “reign of liberty” (Capital. Book III, chapter 48 of the edition established by Engels).

6. In adhering not to any socialist or communist ideology, but to the cause of the working class and of human emancipation, Marx immediately formulated his ethical creed by affirming a “categorical imperative” that was fundamentally different from the one proposed by Kant: “The criticism of religion ends with the teaching that man is the highest being for man, hence with the categorical imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, forsaken, despicable being ...” (Deutsch-Französische Jahrbücher, 1844). After he had become a member of the Communist League and was entrusted with drawing up its charter and articles of association, Marx thought best to express the meaning of this imperative in the form of an appeal for union, similar to that which, before him, the leaders of the Chartist movement had addressed to the British workers. Marx added to it a world-wide dimension: “Workers of all land, unite!” This appeal of 1848 was, nearly twenty years later, to constitute the implicit conclusion to Capital as formulated in the three pages of the chapter entitled: “The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation.” This chapter ends with two passages taken from the Communist Manifesto in which Marx draws a parallel between, on the one hand, the growth of poverty, oppression, slavery and degradation and, on the other, the revolt of the ever-growing working class, educated, united and organised by the very mechanism of the capitalist process of production. Here we find a typical example of the double-sided reasoning, the empirical judgment of the lucid observer paired with the ethical conception of the revolutionary behaviour and emancipatory will of slaves who consciously realise their enslavement.

7. Marx refused to “prescribe recipes (in the style of Auguste Comte?) for the cook-
shops of the future” (Afterward to the second edition of Capital, 1873), just as he never claimed to have invented any new morality intended for the slaves of capital. While we may justly affirm, in Engels’s words, that Marx’s “real mission in life was to contribute, in one way or another, to the overthrow of capitalist society and of the state institutions which it brought into being, to contribute to the liberation of the modern proletariat,” it is wrong to claim that “he was the first to make [this proletariat] conscious of its own position and its needs, conscious of the conditions of its emancipation.” Through this dubious eulogy delivered at Marx’s graveside, Engels became the first bearer of Marxist ideology and thus of a new political superstition, whose principal representatives were to be Lenin and Kautsky. The British proletariat was the first to have gained consciousness of its enslavement and of the conditions for its emancipation. Marx had chosen to cooperate in the movement for the emancipation of the modern proletariat, not as a teacher, but as a disciple of the British proletariat, putting at its service not only the fruits of his studies, but also his energy as a militant. As an ethical act, this choice reduced Marx’s life to that of an intellectual pariah, with a career on the margin of official society, to that of a perpetual beggar, who depended above all on the hand-outs from his friend Engels. It was not as a teacher and founder but as a disciple and pariah that, in 1856, Marx addressed an audience of English workers, referring to the “symptoms of decay, far surpassing the horrors recorded of the latter times of the Roman empire” in order to remind them that “they will then, certainly, not be the last in aiding the social revolution produced by that industry, a revolution which means the emancipation of their own class all over the world which is as universal as capital-rule and wages-slavery.”

8. Nearly 125 years after this appeal, in fact a veritable declaration of faith, the “symptoms of decay” have changed into the certainty of a world in decline without there appearing on the horizon the gravediggers of capital and the State. Can this phenomenon of decline, which seems to contradict the theses formulated by Marx in the conclusion of Capital (“The Historical Tendency of Capitalist Accumulation”), be explained with the help of his materialist conception of history, in other words using the scientific method which Marx claimed to have adopted in the course of a radical critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right? If this is the case, can we consider that “the economic law of motion of modern society” which Marx claimed to have revealed the Preface to Capital to be precisely one of the “truths” resulting from the application of the materialist method? If the answer to both these questions is yes, are we not then obliged to admit that Marx’s thought is opposed to any kind of ethics and that the famous “categorical imperative” was only a sally, a parody of Kantian morality? Does the “economic law” not demonstrate the frightening thesis according to which “even when a society has got upon the right track for the discovery of the natural law of its movement ... it can neither clear by bold leaps, nor remove by legal enactments, the obstacles offered by the successive phases of its normal development” (Preface, Capital).
9. Here is a thesis which seems to justify certain critics of Marx who take him to task for his “historicism,” for his mania for identifying social science (or the so-called human sciences) and natural science, for his ambition to observe and study human societies with the mind of a natural scientist (physicist, astronomer), for his quasi-Spinozian way of exculpating the individual and blaming the “social conditions” of which the individual remains a product, “however much he may subjectively raise himself above them” (Preface, Capital). It follows that neither the capitalist nor the worker is individually responsible for their destiny, since they are only “the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests.” So, in the end, what remains of the “categorical imperative” to overthrow the social conditions which make the workers slaves and reduce them to beasts of burden?

10. Marx envisages this overthrow as a long historical stage in a process of evolution which undoubtedly changes the conditions but which also changes men. Hence the “reformism” in Marx’s political theory, a consequence of his determinism which rules out the possibility of a society “skipping” over the phases of its development or “removing” their obstacles by legal enactments. This “reformism” is clearly expressed in the Communist Manifesto and in the canon of the IWMA; echoes of it can be found in Capital and in other texts where Marx envisages trade union struggles, demands concerning the shortening of the working day and factory legislation to protect the workers’ health and to promote the coercive education of “factory children,” while imposing on the capitalist mode of production, “by a coercive law in virtue of the State (durch Zwangsgesetz von Staats wegen)” (Capital, XV, 9) “the simplest appliances for maintaining cleanliness and health.” As a revolutionary thinker, Marx had to struggle throughout his whole career for “bourgeois” reforms since liberal democracy means the triumph of the freedom of conscience, association and organisation which alone can allow the proletariat to educate itself and to prepare itself for revolution and so for the abolition of capitalism. It is only then that they will be in a position to act in the spirit of the “categorical imperative,” in other words of the ethic which following other reformers placed at the centre of his work. Until the “historic” moment of the revolution, the slaves are only able to “short and lessen the birth-pangs”.