

Mending the Metabolic Rift: Dialectical Compatibilism, Ecosocialism, and Land Ethic[†]

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Abstract: Marxists argue that the capitalism-driven rift in the metabolic relations between humans and nature underpins the ecological catastrophe now besetting the world. The struggle against capitalism, which Marx said must not include “preaching morality,” is met with two points: (i) alter the logic of our present production system that is in inherent tension with nature’s regenerative capacity; and (ii) subsequently change prevailing social practices in a way that will restore our metabolic link with our environment and cease morality altogether. However, I will argue that (1) the supplantation of the economic system with ecosocialism is merely a necessary, but ultimately not sufficient, condition to mend the metabolic rift; (2) following (1), a type of moralism repudiated by some Marxists must also actively govern the political-economic struggle; and (3) such an ethos, typified by Aldo Leopold’s land ethic, must persist even after the replacement of the political and economic structures. In proving (1), I will examine the Marxist position on freedom to ground the debate on the necessary and sufficient means of advancing and sustaining change. I reject the determinist accounts and accept Vanessa Wills’ exegetical appraisal of Marx’s historical materialism as a form of “dialectical compatibilism.” I will show that adopting this interpretation commits one to abandoning claims that: (a) morality should not be preached in the struggle; and (b) it will be eliminated in a classless society. Thus, (2) follows: rejection of the determinist view must entail the acceptance of the need for continuing normativity, a project already explored by analytical Marxists such as G.A. Cohen and Kai Nielsen, which I aim to extend to the ecosocialist movement. I will then show why, proving (3), the land ethic provides the ethos that may furnish the set of sufficient conditions for the restoration of our human-nature metabolism.

Keywords: *Ecosocialism, environmental ethics, land ethic, Marxist ecology, metabolic rift*

Introduction

Two remaining trajectories are now left to the world: ecosocialism or barbarism.¹ The globe seems to be increasingly careening toward the latter as six of the nine planetary boundaries have already been transgressed by humanity, spanning from climate change to biosphere integrity.² Communities are subjected to the deleterious ramifications of ecological overshoots,

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¹ Alberto Garzón Espinosa, “The Limits to Growth: Ecosocialism or Barbarism,” in *Monthly Review* (2022): 35.

² Levke Caesar, et al., *Planetary Health Check* (Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, 2024), 5.

presaging a future that seems to be bleaker by the day.³ Human intervention in the natural world has now come to be so unprecedented that some geologists and ecological scholars deemed it necessary to mark our current epoch as that of the Anthropocene in the “Capitalinian” age.⁴ The labels of the epoch and corresponding age suggest two crucial propositions: (i) rapid alterations in the Earth have been driven largely by human activity; and (ii) such activities, in the current age, have been structured by the distinct system of capitalism that is responsible for the breach in many of the natural world’s biophysical limits.

In response to this crisis, Marxist academics⁵ attempted to provide a critical intervention to the ecological question by explicating and developing Marx’s concept of social metabolism—a project initiated by István Mészáros, later systematically explored by John Bellamy Foster and Paul Burkett, and more recently expanded by Kohei Saito who summarized his thesis as such: “the metabolic interaction of humans with the rest of nature constitutes the basis of living, but the capitalist way of organizing human interactions with their ecosystems inevitably creates a great chasm in these processes and threatens both human and non-human beings.”⁶ By extending the social metabolism analysis to the environmental terrain, these thinkers contend that the ecological catastrophe that besets the world is caused by the rift in the metabolic relations between man and nature following capitalism’s drive for inexorable profit generation. Thus, they offer the claim that a way out of the current crisis entails a restructuring of the current world order. For the ecological rift theorists, this means that the supplantation of capitalist arrangements with an ecosocialist model that eschews the current economic system’s destructive compulsion.

Yet the practical question regarding the effective means to realize the movement that will produce such a transformative project remains. The prediction of the proletariat’s successful revolt against capitalism has yet to succeed on the global stage despite the ever-deepening contradictions entrenched in it. To be sure, such a question resists simplistic explanations that do not appeal to the broader developments in the machinations of capitalism over the decades. As such, I narrow my focus on one observation often leveled against the Marxist tradition: that it tends to relegate the concern of morality to the ideological realm and therefore repudiates moralism. This is not to claim that Marx dispensed with normativity altogether or that all Marxist currents reject moralism, but only that there is a prevailing Marxist reading that subscribes to the “epistemological break” interpretation, underpinning the objections against an appeal to morality.⁷ As such, the present situation demands a rethinking of the revolutionary subject and the means through which change must be delivered, which I argue the aforementioned ecosocialist thinkers have yet to adequately account for. This is where my main contention will come in: there is an imperative to look at the ethical dimension of the ecosocialist struggle, especially in the pursuit of the vision to restore our metabolic unity with nature.

³ Andrew L. Fanning, et al., “The Social Shortfall and Ecological Overshoot of Nations,” in *Nature Sustainability* 5:1 (November 18, 2021): 26–36.

⁴ John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene: Ecological Ruin or Ecological Revolution* (Monthly Review Press, 2022), 14.

⁵ Ning Zhang, “A Forgotten History: Marxist Ecology after Marx,” in *Critical Sociology* 49:1 (January 2023): 165–71.

⁶ Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 23.

⁷ This is expounded in the third section. I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for pointing me toward this direction.

In view of the foregoing, the overarching thesis guiding this paper is: mending the metabolic rift between humanity and nature would require both the replacement of (a) the economic system governing much of the world now with a democratic socialist model; and (b) prevailing anthropocentric and utilitarian ethos with an ecological conscience that must be normatively sustained even once the system has already been changed. This thesis serves to add the (b) condition to the current discourse on ecosocialist thought and contests the orthodoxy that the superstructural components must be seen as a mere secondary terrain of the struggle arising as a repercussion of replacing (a).

This thesis will be reinforced by three main arguments: (1) the replacement of the economic system with ecosocialism merely furnishes a necessary, but ultimately not sufficient, condition to mend the metabolic rift; (2) following (1), a morality-driven campaign must also actively govern the political-economic struggle; and (3) such an ethos, best typified by Aldo Leopold's land ethic, must persist even after the replacement of the political and economic structures.

In doing so, this paper will be divided in four parts. In the first section, I argue why ecosocialism is a necessary condition to mend the metabolic rift. I first interrogate the concept of metabolic unity, assess the internal dynamics of capitalism, and demonstrate how this system's logic intrinsically impedes any hope for the creation of a genuinely sustainable economic framework. I engage with Foster and Saito's conceptualization of metabolic rifts and shifts, and their proposed structural changes to overcome these dilemmas. In the second section, I argue that the necessary structural changes advanced by the thinkers fail to provide sufficient grounds for the restoration of metabolic relations between humanity and nature on logical and practical bases. In this section, I shift the discussion towards the logic of domination over nature that capitalism instilled among humans and how this challenges the possibility, tenability, and sustainability of the success of the ecosocialist revolution. By adopting Vanessa Wills' reading of Marx as a dialectical compatibilist, I will show why this exegetical argument for historical materialism contravenes claims that: (a) morality should not be preached in the struggle; and (b) it will be eliminated altogether in a communist society. The origins of this tension with the view on morality among Marxist thinkers will be explored in the third section. Here, I will argue that the aversion to moralism is unwarranted following the dialectical compatibilist reappraisal of Marx. Contrarily, I will affirm Kai Nielsen's position that the observance of objective values even in a classless society is completely compatible with the claim that morality has the propensity to be used as mere ideology. Once these points have been established, I will be in a position to assert in the fourth section that a form of moralism may furnish the set of sufficient conditions for the restoration of metabolic unity. This may be well situated in the thoughts of land ethic proponents such as Aldo Leopold and J. Baird Callicott.

Metabolic Rift and Ecosocialism

Human activities are mediated by the environment, while people also can and do transform nature in the process of their undertakings. Labor, as far as Marx is concerned, connects humans and nature. Such interdependence constitutes the crux of the metabolism between nature and humanity. However, this process has been radically disrupted by capitalism as its unregulated quest for expansion "generates rifts in natural cycles and process, forcing a series of shifts on the part of capital, as it expands environmental degradation."⁸ Capitalism, in its basic formulation, is an economic arrangement characterized by the private ownership of the means of production, the

⁸ John Bellamy Foster et al., eds., *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth* (Monthly Review Press, 2010), 76.

prime goal of which is the maximization of profit and expansion of capital in the market.⁹ The competitive mechanism intrinsic to it and the resulting need for unrestrained generation of profit facilitated by massive industrial capacity come into odds with the biophysical regenerative limits of the natural environment. I reconstruct the metabolic rift schema as follows:

- (1) Earth is finite with a limited regenerative capacity.
- (2) Such a process of regeneration by (1) is affected by human activity.
- (3) Human activity is also mediated by nature, constituting a metabolic relation of interdependence.
- (4) Human activity is now structured by capitalism.
- (5) Capitalism's social metabolism, following the competitive mechanism's compulsion for endless profiteering, requires limitless growth.¹⁰
- (6) (5) conflicts with (1), rendering capitalism's social metabolism "anti-ecological" and creating a rift between humanity and nature.¹¹

This development demonstrates why, according to Foster, it is the metabolic rift that "constituted the main structure of ecological crisis under capitalism."¹² (1) represents the reality of biophysical constraints, as captured by the nine planetary boundaries, six of which have already been transgressed. Impairing regenerative capacities has ruinous ramifications. Land degradation brought by exhaustion of the farm plots, for example, imperils the fertility and productivity of the soil—a subject that Marx himself devoted copious time to tackling in *Capital* and recently translated notebooks. This human intervention proves (2), as Marx wrote:

Capitalist production collects the population together in great centres, and causes the urban population to achieve an ever-growing preponderance. This has two results. On the one hand it concentrates the historical motive power of society; on the other hand, it disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth, i.e. it prevents the return to the soil of its constituent elements consumed by man in the form of food and clothing; hence it hinders the operation of the eternal natural condition for the lasting fertility of the soil.¹³

This passage also vindicates (3) by showing that all human activities—such as the act of farming for sustenance—are mediated by the natural environment, thereby constituting a metabolic link defined by interdependence. Marx recognized in *The Grundrisse* a form of productive consumption: when one produces, one simultaneously consumes from the means of production and raw materials that come from the natural world.¹⁴ Unity between these two is paramount in maintaining their survival. But now, following (4) and (5), a fissure emerges. Despite said biophysical constraints, Saito pointed out that "capital is incapable of limiting itself. On the contrary, capital constantly attempts to overcome

⁹ This, of course, is a very rough definition of capitalism that may not capture all the complete features that constitute it. But these features are ones that figure commonly among Marxist thinkers and Marx himself in describing capitalism, in addition to the necessary condition of labor's subsumption to capital. See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes and Ernest Mandel, (Penguin Books, 1990).

¹⁰ Kai Nielsen, "Global Justice, Power and the Logic of Capitalism," *Critica* 16:48 (1984): 35–51.

¹¹ Foster, et al., *The Ecological Rift*, 74.

¹² Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene*, 27.

¹³ Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 637.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, (Harper & Row, 1972), 23.

these limits only to increase its own destructiveness against society and nature.”¹⁵ As such, (6) follows: the internal logic governing capitalism is incompatible with an ecological model that allows for the interdependent coexistence of nature and humanity.

Foster and Saito identify the three forms that the rift takes. The first one refers to “the material disruption of cyclical processes in natural metabolism under the regime of capital.”¹⁶ The soil exhaustion scenario typifies this. The second type refers to the spatial rift, characterized by the resulting inimical and extractive relations between the core and periphery. The concentration of the population and resources in the core, for example, is premised on the massive uprooting of materials in the periphery to sustain the growing demands at the expense of the environment’s health. Lastly, the rift also manifests in the temporal domain. The time between the natural environment’s regeneration and the need for capital to expand increasingly diverges, where the valorization of capital necessitates truncating the turnaround time of material resources extracted.

These rifts, being inherent in capitalism as established in (6), are impossible to surmount under the same economic arrangements that caused them. According to Foster and Saito, even the current solutions being advanced are mere shifts that divert the problem elsewhere. The first one takes the form of a technological shift, which aims to use mechanical solutions to temporarily mitigate ecological problems without necessarily changing the system. Saito cited the example of the Haber-Bosch process, which aimed to ameliorate soil exhaustion by mass-producing ammonia and inorganic fertilizer. This innovation, however, merely shifted the rift because the production of ammonia entailed the widespread consumption of another scarce resource as its ingredient: natural gas.¹⁷ The process also involved the emission of more carbon dioxide. On the other hand, the spatial rift births its corresponding shift, where the burdens of environmental harms are externalized to peripheries. A recent study, for instance, found that countries in the Global North collectively accounted for 92% of the total excess emissions in the world.¹⁸ Despite this, Global South nations bear the disproportionate brunt of climate change.¹⁹ Even the renewable energy transition, which purportedly aims to address this problem, perpetuates the same shift. Most metals used in decarbonized technologies, such as copper and nickel, are extracted from mines in the Global South, thereby externalizing the direct ecological impact of destructive practices to them.²⁰ In the same breath, the temporal rift drives a temporal shift, where the disparity arising from the time of capital and nature’s cyclical process likewise brings a certain delay in the full realization of the cumulative costs of destruction, as is the case with climate change, which gives the fossil fuel industry further pretext to shift the burden to the future generation.

¹⁵ Kohei Saito, *Marx in the Anthropocene: Towards the Idea of Degrowth Communism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁷ Patricia M. Glibert, et al., “The Haber Bosch–Harmful Algal Bloom (HB–HAB) Link,” in *Environmental Research Letters* 9, no. 10 (October 1, 2014): 105001.

¹⁸ Jason Hickel, “Quantifying National Responsibility for Climate Breakdown: An Equality-Based Attribution Approach for Carbon Dioxide Emissions in Excess of the Planetary Boundary,” in *The Lancet Planetary Health* 4:9 (September 2020): e399–404.

¹⁹ Abdulaziz I. Almulhim, et al., “Climate-Induced Migration in the Global South: An in Depth Analysis,” in *Npj Climate Action* 3:1 (June 14, 2024): 47.

²⁰ Joshua Matanzima and Julia Loginova, “Sociocultural Risks of Resource Extraction for the Low-Carbon Energy Transition: Evidence from the Global South,” in *The Extractive Industries and Society* 18 (June 2024): 101478.

The conclusion that ecological recovery is impossible under the growth-oriented character of capitalism, regardless of palliatives that supposedly aim to overcome the environmental crisis, is vindicated by empirical trends. The concept of *decoupling* describes the attempts made by states to eradicate the acceleration of the climate catastrophe while maintaining capitalist arrangements. Under this principle, countries must endeavor to decouple the pursuit of absolute quantitative growth of material throughput, resource use, and carbon emissions. Projections based on available data and historical trends, however, show no possibility for such a goal; even if it were to happen, it cannot do so in a manner that is fast enough before irreversible damage has already been wrought.²¹ The solution is therefore clear: limiting economic growth on a global scale is necessary to address ecological overshoot. But this is a goal that is, as (5) shows, incompatible with capitalism's logic. Therefore:

(C1) Transcending capitalism and instituting ecosocialism are necessary to mend the metabolic rift.

The conclusion is akin to Mészáros's call for social control, contra capitalism's anarchic propensity to pursue market-mediated inexorable growth, regardless of the destructive implications.²² According to (C1), the socialist aspect of "ecosocialism" refers to a system where the means of production are collectively owned and operations are democratically planned, as opposed to the current system that valorizes capital and is primarily concerned with exchange value over use value. This variant of socialism also incorporates an ecological approach, because it is logically conceivable to have a socialist economy that is at the same time growth-oriented and where people collectively plan to produce beyond the world's biophysical limits. In fact, this tendency for a Promethean and geo-constructivist Marxism is exactly what the likes of Foster and Saito criticized.²³ As such, ecosocialism is necessary to address the shortfalls of both capitalism and certain streams of socialism. Foster endorses a triangle of ecology, characterized as such: (i) nature's social use, instead of mere ownership; (ii) a commune of workers' regulation of the human-nature metabolism; and (iii) meeting common needs of those in both current and future times. This is, according to Foster, to be integrated with the "elementary triangle" of socialism, defined by common ownership, the proletariat's social production, and meeting the needs of all.

It is important to note that such prescriptions of the model are largely structural, institutional, political, and economic changes. Saito's recommendations for degrowth communism are similar in that regard.²⁴ They are correct to suggest that these are necessary conditions to mend humanity's metabolic relations with nature that were impaired by a system that is just as structural, institutional, political, and economic. However, given the totalizing nature and repercussions of capitalism, I contend that its necessity does not furnish its sufficiency. There are still notable blind spots in the vision being forwarded. To understand this, the next section elaborates on the Marxist theory of historical materialism, its implications for bringing change in the material and superstructural

²¹ Jason Hickel and Giorgos Kallis, "Is Green Growth Possible?," in *New Political Economy* 25:4 (June 6, 2020): 469–86.

²² István Mészáros, *The Necessity of Social Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2015).

²³ John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Hannah Holleman, "Marx and the Commons," in *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 88:1 (March 2021): 1–30.

²⁴ Cf. Kohei Saito, *Slow down: The Degrowth Manifesto*, trans. by Brian Bergstrom, First edition (New York: Astra House, 2024).

dimensions, and the need for an emphasis on the other aspects that will complete the set of conditions to restore our unity with the natural environment.

Ecosocialism and Dialectical Compatibilism

Central to the Marxist emancipatory project is its conception of historical materialism. It is a framework that remains contested as its interpretation among scholars is divided among those who continue to develop it and those who say that Marx had no—and is not in need of—any theory as such.²⁵ In this section, I will only focus on the question of the base-superstructure relations and the implications of exegetical answers as to how movements should approach methods of change toward and even after capitalist supplantation.

G.A. Cohen, in his early intellectual career, attempted the most comprehensive defense and analytical reconstruction of Marx's historical materialism.²⁶ It is there that he explicated the first and second primacy theses, roughly summarized as such: “the first primacy thesis, according to which the productive forces, narrowly construed, have explanatory primacy over the economic structure, and the second primacy thesis, according to which the economic structure has explanatory primacy over the superstructure.”²⁷ It is the *second primacy thesis* I am most concerned with in this section:

(SPT) “The material determines the spiritual to the extent necessary to prevent the spiritual from determining the material.”²⁸

This means that the material base—for this instance, capitalism—definitely shapes superstructural entities, such as culture and laws, in a way that the prevailing economic arrangements are maintained and legitimized. In the case of the ecological rift, capitalism inculcates a culture of domination and mastery over nature that pushes people to treat the environment as a mere resource.²⁹ In doing so, the disruption of cyclical and regenerative processes is deemed acceptable as long as capital is continuously valorized. Coercive and noncoercive structures work simultaneously to mold humanity's internal and spiritual dispositions in a way that renders them incapable of radically shifting the ruling economic relations governing them. The metabolic rift may, thus, be construed as constituting a resulting rift between nature and humans, whereas the latter no longer see themselves as part of the same community as the former and therefore hold no moral responsibility for them. These propositions are plausible, but become more contentious once fully committed to (SPT), stating that any substantial change in the spiritual terrain is incapable of substantially altering the material domain. Vrousalis claim that this is problematic because under this formulation, “materialism would be conclusively refuted if one could offer examples where religious charisma, political leadership, or military genius could be shown to effect epochal transformation, without recourse to claims about economic structure.”³⁰ The repercussions of this technological materialist view invite charges of economic determinism, eliding the supposedly dialectical nature and causal interaction between the two. Such is the realization that Cohen, in his latter life, underscored: that production relations alone gloss over the other equally important factors that

²⁵ Cf. Richard W. Miller, *Analyzing Marx: Morality, Power and History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

²⁶ See Gerald A. Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁷ Nicholas Vrousalis, *The Political Philosophy of G. A. Cohen: Back to Socialist Basics*, (New York: Bloomsbury academic, 2015).

²⁸ Cohen, *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, 369.

²⁹ Cf. Carolyn Merchant, ed., *Ecology: Key Concepts in Critical Theory*, 2nd Ed., (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2008).

³⁰ Vrousalis, 38.

allow for the possibility and necessity of change. It also dulls the potency of human agency in effecting a revolutionary shift to the superstructural terrain to the extent that the structural underpinnings of a system may be upended altogether.

A more promising alternative interpretation has been expressed by Vanessa Wills through an iteration she dubbed “dialectical compatibilism” (DC). The central idea is that “human freedom is itself a human product, one that emerges gradually over the course of history out of human beings’ goal-directed interactions with their natural and social environment.”³¹ I reconstruct some of the corollary central tenets as follows:

- (7) Humans are determined by biological needs and external conditions to a certain extent.
- (8) By responding to (7), humans exercise their agency to change their conditions, thereby broadening their power to control their environment and freedom to shape its processes.

The last clause in (8), however, is erroneous. It is logically possible, and indeed has historically happened, that humans may move to exercise their agency in a way that would lead to the constraint of that freedom. Take the case of fascism adherents who are voluntarily changing extant conditions to push for a society that would heavily constrain their ability to control their environment and shape its processes. I thus introduce a modified version of dialectical compatibilism:

(DC) By responding to (9), humans exercise their agency to change their conditions and the very structures that determined their initial disposition.

The removal of the last clause eludes the baggage of a linear, progressive, and teleological historical view entailed by (8). If we are to take this conclusion further, I argue that it also supposes a further set of claims:

- (9) Superstructures are shaped by economic arrangements in a way that legitimizes these conditions.
- (10) Superstructures, in turn, determine human action and beliefs to a certain extent.
- (11) In the same token as (DC), humans, in responding to the superstructures that determine them, may contest them and eventually change them.
- (12) Upon the delegitimization of material arrangements due to (13), social transformation may emerge according to new superstructures.

The dialectical compatibilism schema can overcome the objections against the technological materialist appraisal of historical materialism by accounting for the more dynamic nature of human freedom and action driven by propositional attitudes for change that may depart from the initial determination of superstructures. But the adoption of this view requires a rethinking of some assumptions and proposals held by ecosocialists who unwittingly echo the contempt for moralism. First, it is important to note that by eschewing a purely economic-determinist account and involving

³¹ Vanessa Wills, *Marx's Ethical Vision* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 100.

an agent in the picture, both dialectical compatibilism and (11) must be committed to underlie another presupposition on *action theory*:

(AT) People act on their determined conditions based on their (i) desires or needs; and (ii) belief that such an action realizes their desires or needs.

This is especially true for (11), where superstructures are already impinging on their desires. If we take emancipatory actions to be governed by agents, then we can assume the standard Davidsonian stance in action theory that reasons causing action are constituted by a person's desires and beliefs, or psychological states more broadly.³² Part of what shapes such motivational propositional attitudes is antecedently held ethical commitments. Given this, action theory makes two variants of a regression scenario possible:

Strong variant. — An ecosocialist society, which has already successfully transitioned its ecological and economic structures to jibe with Foster's triangle of ecology and socialism, reverts to a capitalist model after most of its citizens adopted a domineering ethos and revolted to supplant their prevailing arrangements.

Weak variant. — An ecosocialist society, which has already successfully transitioned its ecological and economic structures to jibe with Foster's triangle of ecology and socialism, maintains its socialist arrangement, but its citizens collectively decide to abandon their society's ecological thrust in order to pursue a Promethean agenda that undermines biophysical limits.

There is nothing in the dialectical compatibilism model that is incompatible with both scenarios occurring. One may contest this by arguing that (8) contravenes the stronger variant because the reversal to capitalist rule actually lessens their control over their environment and the freedom to shape their processes. But this is where the dialectical compatibilism and action theory propositions come into play: people may actually think that their move would broaden their freedom based on the internal ethos and values they come to adopt along the way. Such, too, is the case with the weaker variant. The establishment of institutions that will initially require the respect of biophysical limits during their inception may eventually be replaced through the associated producers' communal movement to do so. It may be argued that these moves leading to both variants are irrational, but this in no way blunts their possibility, because it could still be rational in the agent's own lights. This claim is hardly a controversial one. It is logically possible under dialectical compatibilism that a shift in the ethical commitments among many of them may justify their decisions to replace the system that initially determined them.

The insufficiency of the current ecosocialist model, which involves changes in the structural and material domain, is thus established. This is consistent with Cohen's later observation that it is not merely coercive institutions alone that must be revolutionized, but the prevailing social ethos, which will ensure the sustainability of these structures. Following the tenets of action theory, this must entail not just cultural shifts, but a conscious moral reshaping down to an individual level that aligns with our natural environment—an ethical unity that undergirds the repair of our metabolic rift.

³² Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," in *The Essential Davidson* (Clarendon Press: Oxford University Press, 2006). I recognize, however, that the position is not without its controversy and this is a position merely presupposed here.

If one accepts dialectical compatibilism, we are also committed to accepting that the discussed ecosocialist models are merely necessary but not sufficient conditions to mend the metabolic rift between humans and nature. In the next section, I show how integrating the practice of moral cultivation into the ecosocialist struggle furnishes the set of sufficient conditions for the restoration of metabolic unity.

Marxism and Moralism

Much of the succeeding socialist thinkers' ambivalence on morality may be traced to what was taken to be Marx's own relegation of it to the domain of ideology, as he wrote that "the communists do not preach morality at all."³³ However, it is important to note I do not commit myself to the claim that Marx never had any normative or moralistic position, for that would simply be erroneous. Indeed, his earlier works in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* underscore talk of man's "essential nature" and man as "species-being" to cement his position on the alienation that capitalism produces.³⁴ He also affirmed the "categorical imperative" of dismantling oppressive conditions that cause men to be "debased, enslaved, neglected."³⁵

Changes, however, are stark in his latter works. In the *German Ideology*, his contentions against the Young Hegelians positioned him to reject what he deemed to be idealistic espousal of ideologies, of which morality is part: "They have no history, no development; but men, developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking."³⁶

From here, a paradox identified by Steven Lukes becomes apparent: Marx scorns moralism while at the same time appealing to impassioned normative terms in reviling the ramifications of capitalism.³⁷ Several attempts to address the seeming disconnect had been proposed by Marxists. Ernest Mandel identified three common interpretations: First, some thinkers reject the thesis that there are any ruptures between the early Marx of *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* and the late Marx of *Capital*. Perhaps there was merely a shift in emphasis, and this has been favored by those who advance a humanistic interpretation of Marx. Second, some interpret the early Marx to have had a more "total" grounding of his project, which allows a better grasp of his later positions. Finally, some disavow the merit of the early Marx's works by regarding them as "pre-Marxist."³⁸ Among the paradigmatic examples of the third strand is Louis Althusser, who advanced the epistemological break thesis. Such a break, according to Althusser, occurred when Marx wrote *The German Ideology*.³⁹ This ushered in his "scientific" period, which is to be distinguished from his "ideological" period, where Althusser claimed "all the expressions of Marx's idealist 'humanism' are Feuerbachian."⁴⁰ A prime example of this distinction can be gleaned from Marx's treatment of the individual, wherein

³³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Karl Marx, Frederick Engels Collected Works: Marx and Engels: 1845-1847* (New York: International Publishers Company, Incorporated, 1976), 247.

³⁴ Karl Marx, "Estranged Labour," in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, with Friedrich Engels and Martin Milligan, (Prometheus, 1988), 78.

³⁵ Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction," in *Marx: Early Political Writings*, trans. by Joseph J. O'Malley, (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 64.

³⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, (Foreign Languages Press, 2022), 14.

³⁷ Steven Lukes, *Marxism and Morality*, Marxist Introductions (Clarendon Press, 1985), 4.

³⁸ Ernest Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx, 1843 to Capital*, trans. by Brian Pearce (Monthly Review Press, 1971), 164.

³⁹ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. by Benjamin Robert Brewster, (Verso, 2005), 33.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

the “scientific” Marx veers away from talk of alienation and human essences, pivoting instead toward locating forms of individuality that are brought about by specific material and economic relations.⁴¹

Whether there is truly a rupture is still an open question. Some have tried to posit that the correct understanding of historical materialism can accommodate both the scientific and moral outlook of Marx.⁴² But adjudicating in this debate is beyond the scope of this paper, for the answer will not affect what I criticize. The focus of my dispute is on the repudiation of moralism and the adoption of the belief that it ought to disappear in a communist society, whether they are truly upheld by Marx or simply by Marxists who interpret him to be doing so. Indeed, as Althusser said, “the recourse to ethics so deeply inscribed in every humanist ideology may play the part of an imaginary treatment of real problems.”⁴³ This is because one need not appeal to transhistorical normative standards, for “it is possible then to speak directly of those things that realize the emancipatory aims of the working class and are in its interest.”⁴⁴ Thus, like other ideologies in the superstructure, morality will also be supposedly abolished in a communist society—an idea which Wills also endorsed. Here is the argument’s reconstruction:

- (13) Morality is an ideology that forms part of the superstructure.
- (14) As an ideology, morality is a structure of ideas or practices that serves only a certain class to mystify real relations.
- (15) Persuading the oppressed to revolt involves merely appealing directly to their self-interest and rationality.
- (16) Once (18) succeeds, a classless society will no longer have any ideology.
- (17) Following (19), morality will be abolished in a classless society.

Two conclusions regarding morality may be explicated here: (i) appeal to morality is not necessary in struggling toward a classless society; and (ii) morality would no longer figure in communism. This is because, as (13) articulates, morality is merely one of the many forms of ideology constituting the superstructure of a class-stratified society. Additionally, per (14) and following the Marxist conception of ideology, it distorts and mystifies the real exploitative relations governing classes. As such, one need not resort to this mystification and false consciousness to convince the exploited to emancipate themselves, for (15) establishes that one only needs to appeal to their rationality and self-interest as part of a class that has nothing else to lose but everything to gain. (16) is proven if one accepts the claim (17), for there is no longer any class to be served by a distortive account of reality in such a society.

I argue that these claims and their conclusion are misguided at best and detrimental to the movement at worst. As Kai Nielsen points out in concurrence with the paradox raised by Lukes, there appears to exist a tension between Marx’s brazen negative assessment of capitalism—using

⁴¹ Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, *Reading Capital*, trans. by Ben Brewster, Radical Thinkers (Verso, 2009), 124.

⁴² See Qu Hongmei, “Marxism and Morality: Reflections on the History of Interpreting Marx in Moral Philosophy,” *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 6:2 (2011): 239–57.

⁴³ Althusser, *For Marx*, 249.

⁴⁴ Wills, 193.

value-laden descriptions and appeals to criticize its dehumanizing, alienating, exploitative features—in contrast to his positive endorsement of socialism, and his repudiation of the very act of moralizing.⁴⁵ These assessments, after all, can only be made possible by a normative account of concepts such as exploitation.

As Nielsen correctly argued, (13) should be construed as a proposition on the sociology or anthropology of morals rather than a metaethical claim that adjudges the ontological status of ethics. That is, societies merely tend to use morality as an ideology that mystifies exploitative relations and legitimizes regimes of oppression. However, this propensity does not furnish a necessity. Therefore, it does not follow that just because morality has the tendency to act that way, then it must already be committed to only having that intrinsic function. One can reasonably claim, as Nielsen did, that morality is not a proper subset of ideology. There are merely overlaps between the two as part of a superstructure. There may thus be forms of morality that are not ideological but still superstructural.⁴⁶ Following the refutation of (14), this would entail that not all moralizing necessarily mystifies the relation. For one, I can make the moral claim that inflicting harm upon someone is wrong. This maxim may be used by both oppressors and the oppressed to further their cause. This moral truism may be normatively employed to assess events in the past, present, and even the future of a classless society. By itself, it shows the maxim distorts no reality in service of the ruling class. It only does so conditionally, once applied to mystify facts and obscure relations. Therefore, it only becomes ideological in certain instances as a repercussion of the indeterminacy in interpretation or the availability of facts to which such morals are applied.

Corollary to this is Nielsen's point that "it is not man's consciousness as such which is so determined but the public self-conceptions extant in society. It is those that are ideological; not all his thoughts and beliefs."⁴⁷ This dovetails with the dialectical compatibilism formulation. If this is correct, then we must also be committed to abandoning (15). Causal antecedents of action, as I claimed in action theory, can also be constituted by desires and beliefs. As S. M. Love contends, the very superstructural entrenchment of capitalism may embed such a deep ethical commitment among individuals to revere its institutions to the point that its maintenance becomes part of the realization of their self-interests.⁴⁸ When this occurs, a successful appeal to these people will only work through compelling them to abandon their beliefs through normative discourse—the act of moralizing that some have undermined. For example, a Promethean socialist model over an ecosocialist model may be preferred by people because the former would afford them more luxuries in the immediate. That is a rational position. One could argue that it is not completely rational because it undermines the aspects of temporal shift, for example, in which the future generation will bear the brunt of their destructive activities. But for that to even matter, one has to commit to an ethical position that requires abandoning self-interest alone and caring for those of future generations. Nielsen, however, contended that superstructural changes alone have no causal primacy because moral argument alone "is not the cause of major social changes."⁴⁹ Although this may be true as a matter of empirical fact, one has to construe moral argumentation as being part of a causal chain toward concrete, material

⁴⁵ Kai Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View: Morality, Ideology, and Historical Materialism* (Milton: Taylor & Francis Group, 1988).

⁴⁶ William H. Shaw, "Marxism and Moral Objectivity," in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy Supplementary* 7 (1981): 19–44.

⁴⁷ Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, 149.

⁴⁸ S. M. Love, "Kant After Marx," in *Kantian Review* 22:4 (December 2017): 579–98.

⁴⁹ Nielsen, *Marxism and the Moral Point of View*, 132.

action. This is a reiteration of my point in my invocation of the standard story of action theory. No doubt moralizing alone will not change conditions. But the result of such moral cultivation is what will drive people to adopt an intention to move and sustainably change their circumstances. I agree with the young Marx in this instance: “The weapon of criticism certainly cannot replace the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory, too, becomes a material force once it seizes the masses.”⁵⁰ This is consistent with my position because a further question is asked: so how can theory seize the masses in the first place? If we follow my account of human action in section two, we find a commitment to antecedent motivation theory, according to which there must always be an antecedent motivational set that serves as the basis for the generation of new motivations.⁵¹ Such moral commitments form part of this motivational base.

The merits of this moral cultivation extend beyond merely driving the struggle toward its success. It is also pivotal in sustaining these gains and cementing its permanence, because, as Nielsen said, it is only the public self-conceptions that are determined, but not all of a person’s thoughts and consciousness. If this is true, then (16) is futile. But this contradicts Wills’ claim that the need for morality disappears in a communist society because in such arrangements, the is-ought gap has already been bridged. Yet this is an odd conclusion to accept, given that doing so would be to affirm the very determinist thesis she eschewed. Consider:

- (18) Communist society abolishes all antagonistic social relations.
- (19) Following (18), everything that ‘is’ is tantamount to how everything ‘ought’ to be.
- (20) Given the conditions in (19), there is no longer any need for morality because people are already predisposed to act in a prosocial way.
- (21) Therefore, in a communist society, morality is abolished.

It is particularly the movement from (18) to (20) that I am interested in. I have two contentions. First, I dispute the position in (19) that the way everything is must already be seen as being how it ought to be because of (18). While I can accept the thesis that exploitative social relations comprise the primary problem of humanity, they are not the only dilemma. It is logically conceivable to think of a communist society—that is, where all classes have already been dissolved—that is still rife with problems. Surely, there will still be pain, natural disruptions, and interpersonal conflicts that are not premised on economic exploitation. How would one claim that pain is bad or adjudicate between conflicts without some normative account?

Second, one can dispute my argument by appealing to (20) and saying that, though there may still be such tendencies, people are already going to be internally driven to treat others well and come to certain agreements because the lack of exploitative economic relations shapes their internal dispositions to be prosocial. But then committing to this means having to concede to determinism, suggesting that acting against what one is initially determined to do is impossible, which contravenes (11) claim of dialectical compatibilism and the point that not all of consciousness can be determined. This is also the case with the scenarios I mentioned in the previous section. Although one can correctly assert that ecosocialism represents the communal interest of the oppressed class, it does

⁵⁰ Marx, “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 64.

⁵¹ Alfred R. Mele, *Motivation and Agency*, (Oxford University Press, 2005), 101.

not necessarily follow that it will also be adopted by individuals of that group. As seen in the possibility of the weak variant of the ecosocialist regress scenario, it is conceivable under dialectic compatibilism that individuals may possess the interest to return to conditions that oppress them.

In view of all the foregoing, I am now in a position to assert two propositions that may form part of the sufficient conditions in mending the metabolic rift:

(T1) Inculcating and adopting a moral position are necessary in the struggle for ecosocialism

(T2) Inculcating and adopting a moral position are necessary for sustaining ecosocialism and restoring ecological metabolic unity

The first one is needed for the victory of the struggle, while (T2) is needed for its longevity. It must be noted, however, that such a moral position need not be explicitly held, for it can also be implicitly inscribed in an agent's subjective motivational base. Both must come with (C1). In the next section, I argue that the land ethic is a viable moral position for (T1) and (T2).

Land Ethic and Ecosocialism

Aldo Leopold concludes his seminal work, "The Sand County Almanac," with the "Land Ethic," which heavily impacted conservation efforts and introduced an environmental ethical framework that J. Baird Callicott deemed "the more radical ecocentric point of view."⁵² The crux of introducing this view is premised on the conception that an ethic is a form of limitation that impels cooperation with fellow members of a community whose relations are defined by interdependence. What his land ethic intends is expanding our conception of that community to include the natural environment as well.⁵³ A corollary attitude of this is the adoption of respect for other constituents of our ecological community, appraising them not as a mere resource to be exploited, but as entities with their own right to regenerate. We are therefore neither dominators nor conquerors of nature, but mere members of its community. I schematize this as such:

(22) A person is part of a human community

(23) Those in a human community are part of a larger biotic community

(24) A person has a moral responsibility to members of their community

(25) Following (22) and (23), a person has a responsibility to both fellow humans and other ecological community members

The basis undergirding (25) aligns with the concept of a metabolism governing humans and nature. There is interdependence between humans and their fellow humans, just as humans and nature are interdependent. Therefore, there is no reason why moral obligation among those with the capacity to exercise such must not also extend to the larger biotic community members without expecting reciprocal responsibility from those without the capacity to do so. The caveat regarding capacity, as Callicott also noted, is important because it is simply a fact that not all members of the ecological community—such as the land, plants, animals—are capable of conceiving and exercising

⁵² John Baird Callicott, *In Defense of the Land Ethic: Essays in Environmental Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 7.

⁵³ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020).

moral agency, which just means that the burden of restraint to maintain the metabolism rests on contemplative agents who can either disrupt or sustain it based on their intentional actions. In delivering this, Leopold articulates the thesis of land ethic as: “A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”⁵⁴ Recent empirical developments, however, show the inadequacy of this formulation, especially in accounting for the necessary disturbances at given scales; this led Callicot to reformulate land ethic’s thesis as: “A thing is right when it tends to disturb the biotic community only at normal spatial and temporal scales. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”⁵⁵

This is also consistent with accounts that aim to move beyond “conservation” and toward “expenditure,” such as Thomas Nail’s vision for kinetic of metabolic communism. For him, what is needed is the observance of the principle of reciprocity, wherein we give the extent that we can to the natural environment and we, in turn, receive whatever it gives us.⁵⁶ Doing so, however, must not destroy nature’s capacity to continue giving, which is what the anthropocentric logic of capitalist appropriation currently does.⁵⁷

Such a holistic ecocentric perspective held by Leopold and others presupposes the following claims:

- (26) Ecological community members have their own intrinsic value
- (27) Recognition of (26) is necessary in ingraining an ecological conscience
- (28) The existence of an ecological conscience is necessary for the adoption of the modified land ethic thesis

These presuppositions already set the stage for a deontological view of the land ethic. After all, Leopold himself claimed that one can only be moral toward something that one has an affective affinity to. It requires an inward and cognitive acceptance of moral sensibilities that will direct one’s intentions and actions. Such is the point of (27), in which one’s ecological conscience fixes an internal conviction to uphold responsibility for the health of the environment, leading to (28). But even then, Callicot recognized that the land ethic is still compatible even with the prudential view from an objective perspective, because the rift in the interdependence between humans and nature can cause their mutual destruction if the former, for example, commits to large-scale activities that transgress the modified land ethic thesis.

The ecological conscience that facilitates the observance of the modified land ethic thesis thus adequately fits the moral position referred to in (T1) and (T2), or the other necessary conditions for the repair of the metabolic rift. As I mentioned in the first section, the ecological rift also entails an ethical rift in the superstructural terrain. Further, given the causal role that moralism can play in delivering and sustaining ecosocialism, as tackled in the preceding section, this ecological conscience is necessary to drive the struggle toward its victory and take hegemonic superstructural influence right after. It ensures that the system will be maintained and that the metabolic rift will be mended. It is, however, only necessary as part of a sufficient set of conditions. By itself, it cannot be sufficient,

⁵⁴ Leopold, 211.

⁵⁵ John Baird Callicott, *Beyond the Land Ethic: More Essays in Environmental Philosophy*, Suny Series in Philosophy and Biology (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1999), 138.

⁵⁶ Thomas Nail, *Theory of the Earth* (Stanford University Press, 2021), 260.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 261.

because one can have an ecological conscience, but be rendered incapable of exercising or putting it into practice because of coercive institutions that put valorizing capital as their prime interest.

Given this, I propose that Foster's ecosocialist triangle be modified so that its reflected interdependence between ecology and socialism is extended to the ethical terrain. The three conditions—namely, nature's social use, rational control of human-nature metabolism among workers commune, and meeting the necessities of both current and succeeding ages—must be expanded with the fourth requisite: individuals' embrace of an ecological conscience. Once recalibrated as such, both scenarios of regression I mentioned would be deterred. The weak variant, namely the regression from ecosocialist to Promethean socialist model, would not happen because those collectively planning the production are already inculcated with an ethos and desire that hamper them from impairing their metabolism with nature upon recognition of its intrinsic value. The strong variant, which is the regression from ecosocialism to capitalism, would also be precluded because, following (6), the incompatibility of capitalism and ecology would render the former undesirable by those who already adopt the land ethic. This proposal, of course, is not immune to contestations. I may be disputed on the grounds of: (i) the viability of the land ethic as an ethical underpinning; and (ii) the tenability and sustainability of moralizing. The first one concerns the plausibility of the land ethic's necessity. Some may argue that other moral frameworks may be better suited to supplement the pursuit of mending the ecological rift, such as Callicott's developed earth ethic⁵⁸ or any other deontological view. The answer to this is simple. It is an ecological conscience that is necessary. I did not argue that the land ethic itself is necessary, but only sufficient as the moral foundation of the ecosocialist struggle. This means that other equally compatible ethic may be sufficient to endow one with an ecological conscience.

Indigenous ethical principles, for example, are just as equipped to do so, as seen in the Philippine experience.⁵⁹ The second possible objection concerns the unnecessary role of adopting a normative theory for Marxism.⁶⁰ If one grants the position that no such theory is required and that perhaps a revolution based solely on self-interest-driven rationality will someday come, then one must also commit to accepting determinism and the possibility of the weak regression scenario occurring. It is absolutely compatible with the rational and immediate interest of humans. Surely, this is a position that ecosocialists will find difficult to accept, given that it will also mean that ecosocialism may not even last long enough to mend the metabolic rift. The more plausible line of objection comes from the position that normative reasons are not necessarily motivational. Here, I agree, but note that it does not blunt the force of my position. (T1) and (T2) must be read carefully: both say "inculcating and adopting a moral position," which means that the moral position I speak of is not just some "external" reason, but is an internalized *de re* commitment that is therefore *ceteris paribus* motivational. The point of moral cultivation within ecosocialism thus turns not only to didactically preach moral codes but to form an ethical disposition that integrates normativity into one's subjectivity. Thus, (T1) and (T2) stand if one accepts that barring the strong and weak variants scenario is necessary for any adequate theory of sustainable ecosocialism. Other than this, not all external, normative reasons—including the normativity of revolting itself—are motivational actually

⁵⁸ John Baird Callicott, *Thinking like a Planet: The Land Ethic and the Earth Ethic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁵⁹ Jeanette Yasol-Naval, "From Kapre to Ecological Conscience: Indigenous Beliefs and Practices and the Holistic Perspective of Environmental Ethics," in *Kasarinlan: Philippine Journal of Third World Studies* 17:1 (2002): 52–65.

⁶⁰ See Brian Leiter, "Why Marxism Still Does Not Need Normative Theory," in *Analyse & Kritik* 37:1–2 (November 1, 2015): 23–50.

lend further credence to my position: moral cultivation is needed precisely to connect normative principles to the agent's motivational base and practical commitments, enabling genuine moral adoption and sustained action.

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, I managed to show how the capitalism-created metabolic rift between the relationship of humans and nature underlies the ecological crisis that now besets the world. Any response to this would therefore require an ecosocialist solution, elucidated by the likes of Saito and Foster. Necessarily, I argued that it is still insufficient. I did so by showing that, despite the success of an ecosocialist struggle, two variants of a regression problem are rendered possible according to our dialectical compatibilism account of historical materialism. This poses a problem regarding both the tenability and success of this model as a path toward the restoration of metabolic unity. As such, I have shown that a way out of this may be through the recognition of another necessary condition to furnish the set of sufficient conditions—that of moralization, which Marx and some of his followers are ambivalent about. In the last section, I showed that this moral position is embodied sufficiently by the land ethic and its presupposed ecological conscience.

In doing so, I do not intend to claim that only the necessary conditions I mentioned complete the necessary and sufficient set. Surely, these are INUS conditions, or insufficient but necessary parts of an unnecessary but sufficient set of conditions.⁶¹ They only hold given the manifold conditions I have set throughout the article. I also do not make the claim that the land ethic alone is necessary for the moral position I spoke of. Other moral frameworks may be just as equally compatible with providing the ecological conscience I argued for. I also understand that there are possible problems that may be raised with the tactical difficulty of the moralizing I spoke of, which is beyond the scope of this paper. A possible trajectory that further inquiries can pursue, however, may lie in the direction of the model of emancipatory education that Paulo Freire discussed.⁶² The bottom line is thus: if one is committed to the pursuit of human freedom and environmental sustainability, solutions that eschew purely determinist accounts must seriously engage with the need to go through the arduous process of contending with our moral sensibilities and ethical commitments.

⁶¹ J. L. Mackie, "Causes and Conditions," in *American Philosophical Quarterly* 2:4 (1965): 245–64.

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