

# *The Debate on Subjectivity in Marx and Kant's Moral Thought*

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**Abstract:** This paper delves into the distinct understandings of subjectivity in moral philosophy by Marx and Kant, and analyzes the profound impact of these understandings on modern society. Kant's moral philosophy emphasizes the rational autonomy of the moral subject, asserting that moral laws should be based on universal rational principles, namely the categorical imperative, to ensure the universal validity of moral actions. In contrast, Marx's moral philosophy focuses on the class nature of the practical subject, believing that moral judgments and actions are deeply influenced by the social economic structure and class relations. By comparing the concepts of subjectivity of the two thinkers, this paper reveals the dialectical relationship between reason and practice, universality and class nature, and explores the implications of these theories for contemporary moral philosophy and social practice. This paper argues that understanding the perspectives of Marx and Kant on subjectivity not only aids in deepening the understanding of moral philosophy but also holds significant importance for guiding the moral construction and practice of modern society. Through the analysis of the subjectivity theories of the two philosophers, this paper aims to provide theoretical resources for the development of contemporary moral philosophy and the guidance of social practice, and proposes directions for future research.

## **1. Introduction**

Marx and Kant hold a pivotal position in the history of philosophy, and their moral philosophical thoughts have had a profound impact on subsequent generations. Subjectivity, as a core concept in moral philosophy, manifests differently in the theories of these two philosophers. Kant constructs the universality of moral laws through the rational autonomy of the subject, while Marx critiques the moral hypocrisy of capitalist society from the class nature of the practical subject. <sup>[1]</sup>This paper aims to explore the internal logic and modern significance of their theories on subjectivity through comparative analysis, in order to provide theoretical resources for the development of contemporary moral philosophy and the guidance of social practice.

## **2. Subjectivity in Kant's Moral Philosophy**

### **2.1 Overview of Kant's Moral Philosophy**

#### **2.1.1 Kant's Moral Law: The Categorical Imperative**

Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, like a brilliant star, illuminates the night sky of moral philosophy. At the core of his theoretical system is the moral law known as the "Categorical Imperative." This law, akin to an impartial and selfless judge, demands that we must follow principles that can simultaneously become universal laws when acting. <sup>[2]</sup>That is, our behavioral norms should be those that can be unconditionally followed by everyone. This moral law not only provides clear direction for moral choices but also emphasizes the universality and necessity of moral actions.

#### **2.1.2 Autonomy of the Moral Subject**

In Kant's moral philosophy, the moral subject, namely the human being, is endowed with high autonomy. This autonomy means that a person can decide their actions based on their rational judgment, rather than being constrained by external desires or impulses. Kant compares this autonomy to a lawmaker in the realm of morality, where each individual is the enforcer of their own moral laws. This view not only emphasizes human rational capabilities but also grants everyone the right to autonomously perform their roles on the moral stage. <sup>[3]</sup>

### **2.2 Manifestation of Subjectivity in Kant's Moral Philosophy**

#### **2.2.1 Status of the Rational Subject**

In Kant's moral philosophy, the status of the rational subject is supreme. He believes that only reason can reveal the true nature of morality, while sensory experience can only provide material for moral judgment and cannot determine the essence of morality. This emphasis on reason not only crowns reason as the highest authority in the moral hall, deciding all moral actions, but also underscores the central role of reason in moral judgment.

#### **2.2.2 Universality of Moral Actions**

Kant emphasizes the universality of moral actions, that moral laws should apply to everyone, regardless of time, place, or individual differences. This universality requires us to consider the general applicability of actions when making moral judgments. This view not only emphasizes the universality and necessity of moral laws but also highlights the universality and consistency of moral actions.

### **2.3 Limitations of Kant's Subjectivity**

#### **2.3.1 Problem of Abstractness**

Although Kant's moral philosophy provides clear guiding principles for moral actions, his theory also faces the problem of abstractness. While the Categorical Imperative provides a universal moral law, its application in specific situations appears abstract and elusive. This abstractness not only makes Kant's theory ambiguous in practical application but also makes it difficult for people in real life to accurately grasp the boundaries of moral actions.

### 2.3.2 Challenges in Practical Application

Kant's moral philosophy also faces challenges in practical application. His theory emphasizes rational autonomy and the universality of moral laws, but in real life, people's moral actions are often influenced by various factors, including emotions, culture, social environment, etc. This disconnect between theory and practice not only makes Kant's theory difficult to operate in practical application but also makes it difficult for people in real life to fully follow Kant's moral laws.

## 3. Subjectivity in Marx's Moral Philosophy

### 3.1 Overview of Marx's Moral Philosophy

#### 3.1.1 Historical Materialism and Morality

Karl Marx's moral philosophy represents a radical shift in the understanding of ethics, challenging the traditional notions that have long been held as sacrosanct. According to Marx, morality is not a set of abstract, unchanging principles that exist in a vacuum, but rather, it is inextricably linked to the social and economic fabric of society. It evolves and adapts in tandem with the progression of history.

The cornerstone of Marx's philosophical outlook is historical materialism, which asserts that the mode of material production within a society fundamentally shapes its social superstructure. This superstructure encompasses various aspects of societal organization, including legal systems, political structures, religious beliefs, and, crucially, moral values. Thus, moral concepts are not static or autonomous entities; they are instead dynamic reflections of the prevailing social and economic conditions, as well as the collective understandings and norms that govern social interactions at particular points in history.

In this framework, morality is seen as a product of the material conditions of society, and as such, it is subject to change as those conditions evolve. This perspective diverges significantly from moral philosophies that posit an eternal, universal moral law, instead grounding morality in the concrete realities of human existence and the historical context in which it is situated. Marx's approach invites a critical examination of moral norms, encouraging a view that sees them as contingent upon and responsive to the economic and social structures that give them life.

#### 3.1.2 Class Struggle and Moral Judgment

In the realm of moral philosophy, Karl Marx places a significant emphasis on the concept of class struggle as a pivotal element. He posits that the moral judgments individuals make are frequently colored by their respective class affiliations, with distinct classes adhering to divergent moral standards. Within the context of a capitalist society, the inherent conflict between the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who sell their labor, results in a divergence of moral perspectives.

Bourgeois morality, reflecting the interests of the capitalist class, tends to champion principles such as individual liberty and the inviolability of private property. These values are seen as essential for the maintenance and expansion of capitalist relations. Conversely, proletarian morality, which arises from the experiences and aspirations of the working class, places a greater emphasis on collective welfare and the pursuit of social justice. This perspective is rooted in the recognition of shared struggles against exploitation and the desire for a more equitable distribution of wealth and power.

Marx's analysis suggests that to gain a genuine understanding of morality, one must delve into the underlying dynamics of class struggle and trace its historical trajectory. He advocates for a critical examination of how class interests shape moral discourse and practice, and he calls for a

moral philosophy that is attuned to the realities of class conflict and the potential for social transformation. By situating morality within the context of class relations, Marx challenges the notion of morality as an apolitical or neutral domain, instead revealing it as a site of contestation and a potential force for social change.

## **3.2 Manifestation of Subjectivity in Marx's Moral Philosophy**

### **3.2.1 Status of the Practical Subject**

Marx emphasizes the importance of practice in moral philosophy. He believes that humans change the world through practical activities and, in the process, shape their moral concepts. The practical subject, those engaged in material production and social struggle, is the creator and practitioner of moral concepts. In Marx's view, morality is not a static set of rules but a dynamic, evolving process of practice. Therefore, the status of the practical subject is crucial in Marx's moral philosophy.

### **3.2.2 Class Nature of Moral Actions**

Karl Marx's perspective on moral actions is deeply intertwined with his understanding of class-based relations. He asserts that the norms and judgments that guide people's behavior are not universal but are instead shaped by the specific social and economic conditions of their time. In the context of a capitalist society, this manifests in the stark contrast between the moral concepts upheld by the bourgeoisie and those held by the proletariat.

Bourgeois morality, reflecting the values of the capitalist class, tends to prioritize individual interests and the competitive spirit. This is because the capitalist system thrives on the pursuit of personal gain and the accumulation of capital, which necessitates a moral framework that legitimizes and encourages such behavior. On the other hand, proletarian morality, which emerges from the collective experiences of the working class, emphasizes the virtues of solidarity and mutual aid. These values are seen as essential for the workers to unite against the common adversary—the capitalist class—and to strive for a more just and equitable society.

Marx's contention is that to grasp the true nature of moral actions, one must engage in a rigorous analysis of the class relations and social structures that underpin them. He challenges the notion that moral actions are purely individual or abstract, instead arguing that they are deeply embedded in the material conditions of society and the power dynamics between classes. By examining the class basis of morality, Marx invites a critical perspective that seeks to uncover the ways in which moral actions are both a reflection of and a reaction to the social and economic order. This approach not only sheds light on the motivations behind moral behavior but also points to the potential for moral actions to serve as a catalyst for social change and the reconfiguration of class relations.

## **3.3 Critical Aspects of Marx's Subjectivity**

### **3.3.1 Critique of Kant's Subjectivity**

Marx offers a profound critique of Kant's moral philosophy. He believes that Kant's philosophy is too abstract and idealistic, ignoring the influence of social economic conditions on moral concepts. Kant emphasizes the autonomy of the rational subject and the universality of moral laws, but in Marx's view, this autonomy and universality are built on a fantastical foundation. Marx believes that the true moral subject is the working class in practice, whose moral concepts are formed in the struggle with the bourgeoisie, not in abstract rational thought.

### **3.3.2 Critique of Capitalist Morality**

Karl Marx offers a trenchant critique of the moral concepts that underpin capitalist society,

arguing that they are fundamentally rooted in systems of exploitation and oppression. According to Marx, capitalist morality is constructed upon a paradoxical foundation that extols the virtues of individual freedom and the sanctity of private property, while simultaneously marginalizing or outright ignoring the principles of social justice and the liberation of humanity.

Marx contends that capitalist morality serves as a veneer of legitimacy, concealing the harsh realities of social inequality and the ongoing class struggle. It is, in his estimation, a form of hypocritical morality that perpetuates the status quo by presenting the capitalist order as natural and just, thereby obscuring the inherent injustices and the exploitative nature of the economic system.

In response to this critique, Marx advocates for the creation of a new moral framework that is aligned with the principles of social justice and the emancipation of all people. This new moral concept would be grounded in the recognition of the collective interests of the working class and would seek to dismantle the structures that perpetuate inequality and oppression. It would reflect the genuine aspirations and needs of the proletariat, aiming to establish a society where human potential can be fully realized and where social relations are based on solidarity and equality.

Marx's vision for a new morality is not merely a theoretical construct but a call to action, urging the working class to recognize their shared interests and to organize for the transformation of society. By advocating for a moral system that is in harmony with the pursuit of social justice and human emancipation, Marx challenges the capitalist moral order and envisions a future where morality is not a tool of class domination but a force for the realization of universal human values.

## **4. Comparison and Dialogue between Marx and Kant on Subjectivity**

### **4.1 Comparison of Theoretical Foundations of Subjectivity**

#### **4.1.1 Dialectics of Reason and Practice**

Kant's theoretical foundation for subjectivity is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason. He posits that the rational subject is capable of transcending empirical conditions to discern moral laws through pure practical reason. This leads to the formulation of the categorical imperative, which demands that actions be judged by whether they could be universally applied as a law. <sup>[4]</sup>In contrast, Marx's theoretical foundation is grounded in historical materialism, which sees reason as inseparable from the material conditions of society. For Marx, the subject is not a disembodied rational agent but a historical and social being whose consciousness is shaped by practical engagement with the world, particularly through labor and class struggle. This dialectical relationship between reason and practice is a fundamental difference between the two thinkers, with Kant elevating reason above practice, while Marx integrates reason into the practical transformation of society.

#### **4.1.2 Conflict between Universality and Class Nature**

Immanuel Kant's philosophical quest for a universal moral law is grounded in the belief that ethical principles should transcend individual interests and the particularities of social circumstances. Kant's aspiration for universality is designed to guarantee that moral principles possess an objective validity and are universally applicable to all rational beings, irrespective of their personal or societal affiliations. This approach seeks to establish a moral framework that is both impartial and universally authoritative.

In contrast, Karl Marx offers a critique of Kant's notion of moral universality, contending that moral judgments are inextricably linked to the class interests of those who formulate them. <sup>[5]</sup>Marx's analysis reveals that in a capitalist society, the moral values espoused by the bourgeoisie align with the interests of the ruling class, promoting a moral order that supports capitalist relations. Conversely, the proletariat's moral perspective is shaped by their collective experiences and aspirations, advocating for values that align with their struggle against exploitation and their pursuit

of social equity.

The tension between the universality of moral principles and their class-based nature is a fundamental point of contention in moral philosophy. Kant's perspective champions a moral order that is elevated above the fray of class interests, proposing a set of transcendent moral imperatives that are universally binding. Marx, on the other hand, underscores the embeddedness of morality within specific social and economic contexts, arguing that moral judgments are always situated within the material conditions of society and the power relations between classes.

This divergence in approach highlights a critical debate in ethical theory, where Kant's ideal of a universal moral law stands in contrast to Marx's view of morality as a reflection of class relations and historical material conditions. The Kantian vision seeks to establish a moral realm that is autonomous and universal, while Marx's perspective invites a critical examination of how moral principles are shaped by the social and economic structures of the time, and how they can be transformed to serve the interests of social justice and human emancipation.

## **4.2 Comparison of Moral Practice of Subjectivity**

### **4.2.1 Kant's Moral Ideal and Reality**

Kant's moral ideal is one of autonomy, where individuals act according to maxims that they could will as universal laws. This ideal is meant to provide a framework for moral decision-making that is both rational and binding. However, the application of Kant's moral principles to real-world situations is often fraught with difficulties<sup>[6]</sup>. The categorical imperative can seem abstract and unyielding, sometimes leading to moral prescriptions that appear overly rigid or disconnected from the complexities of human motivation and social context. Critics argue that Kant's moral philosophy may lack the flexibility to account for the nuances of human experience and the diversity of moral values across cultures and historical periods.

### **4.2.2 Marx's Moral Critique and Transformation**

Marx's approach to moral practice is characterized by a critical engagement with the existing social order. He critiques the moral norms of capitalist society as serving the interests of the bourgeoisie, which he argues are maintained through the exploitation of the working class. Marx calls for a transformation of society to achieve a more just and equitable order, where moral practice is rooted in the struggle for social change and the emancipation of the working class. This transformative approach to morality is deeply practical, aiming to change the material conditions of society rather than merely prescribing individual actions. Marx's emphasis on the practical subject and the class nature of morality leads him to advocate for a moral practice that is collective, action-oriented, and aimed at overcoming the alienation and oppression inherent in capitalist society.

## **4.3 Modern Implications of Subjectivity**

### **4.3.1 Insights for Contemporary Moral Philosophy**

The dialogue between Marx and Kant on subjectivity continues to offer valuable insights for contemporary moral philosophy. Kant's emphasis on the universality of moral principles remains a cornerstone of discussions on human rights and ethical norms, providing a basis for claims about the inherent dignity of all individuals and the objective nature of moral obligations. Marx's critique of class-based morality and his focus on the practical subject offer a framework for understanding the social and economic determinants of moral behavior, which is particularly relevant in discussions of social justice, equality, and the critique of global capitalism. The combination of Kant's universalist approach and Marx's critical-practical perspective can enrich contemporary moral philosophy by providing a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities of moral

life.

### 4.3.2 Guidance for Social Practice

The comparison between Marx and Kant also has significant implications for social practice. Kant's moral philosophy can inspire individuals to strive for moral perfection and to act according to principles that respect the dignity of all. It can also inform efforts to promote ethical behavior in professional and public life, emphasizing the importance of integrity and the principled pursuit of the common good. Marx's approach, on the other hand, offers a critical lens through which to analyze and challenge oppressive social structures, advocating for collective action and social transformation. This perspective can guide social movements and political initiatives aimed at addressing systemic inequalities and promoting a more just and humane society. Both Kant's emphasis on individual moral agency and Marx's focus on collective struggle and social change can inform efforts to promote ethical behavior and social progress in the modern world.

In conclusion, the detailed comparison and dialogue between Marx and Kant on subjectivity reveal rich and complex approaches to moral philosophy that continue to resonate with contemporary concerns. Kant's emphasis on reason and universality provides a foundation for ethical reflection, while Marx's focus on practice and class nature offers a critical perspective on the social and economic conditions that shape moral life. Together, these insights can guide contemporary moral philosophy and social practice towards a more just and humane society, combining the pursuit of universal moral principles with a commitment to practical engagement and social transformation.

## 5. Conclusions

Through the comparative analysis of subjectivity in Marx and Kant's moral philosophy, this paper reveals the dialectical relationship between reason and practice, universality and class nature. Kant's concept of subjectivity emphasizes the autonomy of the moral subject and the universality of moral laws, while Marx emphasizes the class nature of the practical subject and the class basis of moral actions. These different perspectives on subjectivity not only enrich the theoretical of moral philosophy but also have important implications for guiding the moral construction and practice of modern society. Future research can further explore how to achieve a harmonious unity of reason and practice, universality and class nature in modern society, and how to construct a more just and moral society.

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