

DEPARTMENT OF --- --- PHILOSOPHY



FRIDAY | December 9, 2022 | Royce Hall 314 | 4:00-6:00PM

Marx and the Dialectical Compatibilism of Freedom and Determinism

If Marx's economic determinism requires that individual human beings always only behave just as the "laws of history" unavoidably compel them to, then the practice of assigning moral praise and blame is no more appropriately applied to people than it is to inanimate objects dropped from heights. Numerous interpreters of Marx, presuming that historical materialism does entail a strict, mechanistic determinism, have gone on to reason that Marx's theory is therefore inhospitable to morality. However, historical materialism does not entail this.

In this talk, I argue that Marx should be understood as advancing a "dialectical compatibilism" of freedom and determinism. I use the term "dialectical compatibilism" to invoke both the ways in which Marx's approach to freedom and determinism is in conversation with traditional analyses of this pairing, and also the ways in which it is fundamentally divergent from them. This position moves beyond the views typically arrayed along the axes of determinist or libertarian, compatibilist or incompatibilist.

Human freedom is itself a human product, developing out of human beings' goal-directed interactions with their natural and social environment. There is no inconsistency in Marx describing fairly lawlike, deterministic regularities of human behavior on the one hand and speaking of a flourishing of human freedom, individuality, and creative potential on the other. If determinism is the negation of real human agency, then human freedom is the negation of that negation, one that can emerge only in the course of history.



Vanessa Wills is Assistant Professor of Philosophy at The George Washington University. Her areas of specialization are moral, social, and political philosophy, nineteenth century German philosophy (especially Karl Marx), and the philosophy of race. Her research is importantly informed by her study of Marx's work, and focuses on the ways in which economic and social arrangements can inhibit or promote the realization of values such as freedom, equality, and human development. Her monograph, *Marx's Ethical Vision*, is forthcoming from Oxford University Press.