Jean-Paul Sartre famously wrote, nearly 50 years ago, that Marxism “remains the philosophy of our time. We cannot go beyond it.” In his critic Raymond Aron’s words, Marxism was for Sartre the “insurpassable [or, in other translations: unsurpassable] philosophy of our time.” Taken in context, Sartre’s pronouncement was at once descriptive and prescriptive: it was, according to him, neither objectively possible for the philosopher to leave the confines of Marxism, nor ethically permissible to attempt to do so.

This ‘thick’ or hybrid modality was characteristic of dialectical materialism: the eventual overthrow of capitalism, the dictatorship of the proletariat, the subsequent disappearance of the state, these were stages which were at once inevitable, and the proper aims of political action at successive moments of the historical process. Dialectical materialism was at once a theory of the historical and social process, an overarching perspective, a methodology for arriving at the truth regarding these matters, and finally a practical (ethical and political) norm. The underlying necessity was material, not metaphysical: ideas were thought to be the necessary byproduct of objective economic conditions, in particular of the production relations and the accompanying class struggle. One mechanism which was supposed to underlay or implement this necessitation was a principle of ideological reflection:

dialectical materialism, as a theory or perspective, a train of thought, was thought to be secreted by the economic set-up, becoming the ideology of the proletariat, thus motivating its members to undertake the revolutionary activities which would eventually lead to the overthrow of capitalism, etc. Indeed, Sartre’s quote above is truncated: “[Marxism] remains [...] the philosophy of our time because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it.”

1 The French word is “indépassable”.
2 The label is one which I am coining for present purposes. I am not a Marxian scholar and as will be immediately obvious my goal in this paper has nothing to do with political philosophy or history. In particular, although I am aware of the distance between Marx himself and later forms of Marxism such as dialectical materialism, and of differences between various forms, ‘vulgar’ and otherwise, of Marx-inspired thought, I have no use here for such distinctions. Interested non-specialist readers might like to consult http://marxmyths.org/.
Thus Sartre, faithful to materialism, recognized at once the inevitability of a certain train of thought at a given moment of human history, and its contingent character: the process of which it was a part would eventually lead to a new situation, in which a different train of thought would become available (and would in fact **inevitably** be taken up, thus presumably becoming the insurpassable philosophy of the new epoch).

This remembrance of things past motivates this paper’s title and its general direction, as I will try to make evident presently. But first I need to make perfectly clear that I do not intend to base a value judgment on naturalism on the parallel I am drawing with Sartre’s version of Marxism. It is perfectly obvious that there are continuities between Marxism and contemporary naturalism, but I do not intend to draw them out in this paper. Marxism, especially of the Sartrian sort, is held in low esteem in many quarters nowadays, in particular among a majority of committed naturalists. I am emphatically not suggesting that what (at least until the recent economic events) appeared to most people as history’s negative judgment on Marxism has any bearing on contemporary naturalism. In fact, I will be defending a position which falls in the ballpark of ‘liberalized’ naturalism. One of the differences between my position and stronger or stricter forms of naturalism concerns the modal status of the naturalistic stance, and this is where the parallel with Marxism comes in, merely as a heuristic or expository device.

1. **Naturalism: Descriptive and Normative**

What is variously known as scientific or philosophical naturalism in the context of contemporary analytic philosophy appears, at least to our eyes which do not yet have the benefit of hindsight, as one of those bicentennial groundswells which sweep the entire philosophical scene. As many authors have stressed (it has indeed become an *idée reçue*, a ready-made morsel of philosophical conversation), nearly everyone (in the English-speaking world) is a naturalist of sorts. It turns out that there are different kinds of naturalism. Some say that different philosophers mean different things by naturalism, but I prefer to think that philosophers have different views about the nature, structure and scope of naturalism, conceived as a very general stance towards human knowledge and the role played by the natural sciences. In the most general sense, I see naturalism as the recommendation that

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4 "It is a commonplace that ‘Naturalism means many different things to many different people’.” Mario De Caro/David Macarthur (Eds.), *Naturalism in question*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2004, Editors’ introduction, p. 3. The embedded quotation is from Lawrence Sklar, “Naturalism and the interpretation of theories”, in: *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 75, 2, 2001, pp. 43-58.