The end of the twentieth century, and of a millennium, may be an appropriate time at which to ask where Marxism went wrong. The century was that in which Marxism came and went as a world-shaping political and cultural force. Its tragic history is one of zealous hopes and desperate failures, of revolutions and mass suffering, of ideas institutionalized and institutions collapsing. The millennium reminds us that Marxism was the millennial creed of modernity. If a few still cling to its revolutionary hopes, their rivals and friends alike now find it virtually impossible to take such ideas seriously. Where once were Marxists, postmodernists now indict Marxism as an archetypically modern essentializing metanarrative and totalizing discourse. Whatever Marxism might be at the end of the millennium, it is not what was once preached by Engels and Kautsky, Lenin and Stalin, Trotsky and Mao. What remains of Eastern Marxism is merely conservative; what remains of Western Marxism is merely academic.

This chapter amplifies the argument of Alasdair MacIntyre that Marxism failed because it never established premises that were sufficiently robust and sufficiently distinct from those of liberal theory to enable it to mount a radical challenge to capitalist practice. The chapter also relates that argument to the argument of others that Marxism now requires an ethics. It argues that, if Marxists are to mount an ethical challenge to capitalism, they must first go back to Marx’s original premises and elaborate them sufficiently to contest those of liberalism.¹

Ethical Marxism

Since the theoretical and institutional collapse of Marxism-Leninism, a number of Western academics have attempted to recast Marxism in an
ethical form. Their attempts have two, related, warrants in the history of a tradition which, for the most part, set itself against any form of moralizing. One warrant is the previous attempts of some Western Marxists to ‘humanize’ Marxism. The second is the publication and translation, around mid-century, of several previously unknown works by ‘the early Marx’ in which he wrote of the alienation of humankind from our species-essence. These early works, and those earlier Western Marxists, made evident the origins of Marxism in Hegelianism. Several of the more recent ethical Marxist academics have gone further, claiming a considerable influence upon and affinity with Marx of classical Greek philosophy and particularly of the philosophy of Aristotle. Rather than focus upon the influence of Hegel’s historicized teleology, they identify a more naturalistic teleology and, therefore, a more directly and authentically Aristotelian influence than any that might be ascribed to Hegelian mediation alone.\(^2\) Carol Gould and Scott Meikle were among the first to contend that Marx’s theories were grounded in an Aristotelian ontology,\(^3\) and others have argued about the extent to which those theories should be considered Aristotelian.\(^4\) Most recently, Lawrence Wilde has discussed Marx’s Aristotelianism within an overview of humanist Marxism.\(^5\)

Wilde acknowledges that ‘the politics of working-class interest has not produced a socialist consciousness’, and therefore that Marxism has to ‘suggest reasons why people *ought* to unite to change the world’.\(^6\) The central reason is that class society alienates us from our essential human nature of social creativity. He presents Marx’s ‘commitment to communism’ as ‘an ethical commitment to the creation of the good life’, as a ‘struggle for the reconciliation of existence with essence’ and as ‘an appeal to how we *ought* to live’, ‘that we *ought* to be at one with our essence’.\(^7\) Wilde defends Marx’s postulated essentialism from the charge that it commits ‘the naturalistic fallacy of deriving an “ought” from an “is”’. He does so by appealing to MacIntyre’s argument in *After Virtue* ‘that values are often built in to premises, particularly when the premises are of a functional kind’,\(^8\) and to MacIntyre’s counter-charge that the ‘Enlightenment project’ of attempting to justify the rules of morality independently of what ‘is’ was bound to fail. MacIntyre’s teleological alternative, Wilde implies, gives the logical form that must be assumed by a Marxist morality. It has three parts:

First, there is the idea of an ‘untutored’ human nature; second, the idea of man as he could be if he realized his *telos*; and third, the moral precepts which enable him to get from one stage to the other. The