In 2005, Joseph Fracchia, after surveying attempts over the previous 25 years to ‘offer a historical-materialist account of human nature’, argued that those attempts had ‘stalled’ because they had ‘failed to grasp Marx’s...conception...by its corporeal roots’ (2005, 24, 35). He went on to quote Terry Eagleton as ‘best summarising’ the ‘daunting challenges’ this involved. Eagleton (1990, 197) had characterised Marx’s ‘massive undertaking’ as ‘animated’ by the following question:

What if an idea of reason could be generated up from the body itself. ...What if it were possible, in a breathtaking wager, to retrace one’s steps and reconstruct everything – ethics, history, politics, and rationality – from a bodily foundation?

Marx’s works were just that ‘wager’. His thinking about ‘objective being’ provided him with the means by which to pursue it. With this foundation, Marx was able to recognise the influence of our ‘corporeal roots’ and to outline and sketch that reconstruction – one in which the corporeal is no longer considered an obstacle or hindrance to our humanity but rather as the foundation of its character, its fragility, and its promise.

Here I address the second key question posed in the introduction to this book: what alternative did Marx suggest to the traditional approach to human nature, and in particular, how did Marx make the case that corporeality was central to that nature? I have already argued that Marx criticised the traditional approach to human nature, considered in terms of substance, as incomplete. This enabled the non-corporeal to be treated as our essential nature, independent of all other things, by abstracting it from its intimate, inescapable ties to the balance of existence. In place
of the traditional formulation of a nature or substance, Marx understood human nature in terms of ‘objective being’, consisting of a range, or ‘ensemble’ (1975g, 423), of relationships such that the objects of those relationships were not external to but part of our being.

Marx built on this foundation to demonstrate that this intimate involvement in the world makes our being precarious and deeply dependent on the cooperation of others so as to secure a stable relationship with the objects of those relations, including those objects that form part of nature. The very ontological openness and incompleteness of our being renders the common labour under a common mode of production essential to and pervasively, intimately influential over our very constitution. I argue that this dependence founded Marx’s understanding of ‘species being’ and explains his central emphasis on the mode of production.

This dimension of Marx’s works – the precarious, unstable, and fragile character of our being – has not been well recognised in the literature. In part, this is so because of a failure to consider Marx’s works in light of the tradition of debate about a nature or substance. This allows assumptions of stability and independence to exert a lingering effect such that the insufficiently exorcised ghosts of political economy’s ‘abstract man’ continue to appear to somehow stand outside the relations that compose them. To treat Marx’s works as part of the tradition of debate about a nature or substance is an essential first step to fully comprehending Marx’s intent. It is to reveal the fragility and vulnerability of every being and the immanent risk so well marked by Spinoza, of that being’s compromise and collapse. It is to reveal that creature’s deep dependence on what traditionally is considered external to it. In those ‘external’ relations, our stability and continuity resides. Those relations, which Marx described as the dominant mode of production, exercise a permanent pervasive influence. It is equally to note the promise and beauty of being: to participate so openly in many relationships is to participate in a near-boundless potential.

Marx, by ‘inverting’ Hegel’s dialectic, grounded our being in the world. In adopting the language of materialism, with its emphasis on the volatility of matter, Marx made our bodies matter. The centrality of this influence has, however, not always been recognised by commentators on Marx’s work. Whilst the necessity of the corporeal is acknowledged without hesitation, it tends to be only in the most basic sense of a limiting need, as suggested by Agnes Heller (1974), and an obstacle to be overcome. The treatment of the corporeal in the literature too often still resembles Feuerbach’s ‘religious thought’ – that which imagines human