In this essay, we will examine the influence of natural law theory on the early and later writings of Karl Marx in order to show the continuity between his nineteenth-century critical social theory and the classical and medieval traditions. In his 1926 work, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, Richard Tawney wrote in a relatively obscure and largely forgotten comment that Marx was the “last of the Schoolmen,” that is, last of the medieval natural law theorists following in the footsteps from the twelfth to the fourteenth century of Pierre

1 Richard Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (London: J. Murray, 1927). By characterizing Marx as the “last of the Schoolmen,” Tawney was referring to Thomas Aquinas’ labor theory of value and the continuity of traditions between Marx and neo-Aristotelian medieval Scholasticism. Tawney argued that Marx was the end of a long tradition of theorists that included the 13th-century theologian Thomas Aquinas, the 14th-century scholastic Henry of Langenstein, and the 16th-century Protestant reformer Martin Luther who made the point that the appropriate and “reasonable remuneration” of wages for a worker or merchant should be based on their labor and contribution to the common good. “The medieval theorist condemned as a sin precisely that effort to achieve a continuous and unlimited increase in material wealth which modern societies applaud as a quality, and the vices for which he reserved his most merciless denunciations were the more refined and subtle of the economic virtues” (pp. 35–36). The Scholastics considered economic speculation, avarice, and exploitation as “unpardonable sins” as they stressed “the just price and prohibition of usury.” Usury was condemned because it was living without labor (p. 43). This natural law became part of ecclesiastical doctrine and cannon law of medieval Christianity. This was their economic ethic and, according to Tawney, Marx was part of this tradition (pp. 39–55). Tawney recognized the utopian element of medieval economic ethics in the face of the transformation of the market economy, agricultural productivity, and the industrial and financial explosion of the sixteenth century. However, in spite of this movement of history, he writes: “When all is said, the fact remains that, on the small scale involved, the problem of moralizing economic life was faced and not abandoned. The experiment may have been impracticable...but it had in it something of the heroic, and to ignore the nobility of the conception is not less absurd than to idealize its practical results” (p. 62). The same is true for Marx. Tawney was an Anglican social theorist who, like John Locke earlier in the seventeenth century, was also influenced by another Anglican theologian and neo-Aristotelian, Richard Hooker. Tawney was insightful in placing Marx within the natural law tradition but undoubtedly incorrect in describing him as the “last” of the Schoolmen.
The purpose of this essay is not to definitively establish specific connections between Marx and Aquinas or the medieval Schoolmen, but rather, to tie the logic and framework of Marx's overall theory of justice in ethics, politics, and economics back to the ancient and medieval traditions of Aristotelian social theory and political economy; this is how he defined his view of economic ethics and social justice. Unlike the modern Enlightenment theories of justice, the breadth and depth of Marx's theory reflect the profound influence of these pre-modern theories. Aristotle's theory of justice included issues of character, virtue (arete), happiness (eudaimonia), human need (chreia), knowledge, wisdom (phronesis), law, constitutions, economic or particular justice, political or universal justice, best societies, and ideal polity, that is, what today would be considered under moral philosophy, social ethics, political philosophy, social theory, history, and political economy.

For Marx, social justice is a moral and intellectual virtue promoting individual freedom, self-development, and self-realization of human rationality and creativity in productive, aesthetic, and practical activity (praxis) and a social ethics for the general welfare and common good within a political and economic democracy; it represents moral norms grounded in social ethics, democratic socialism, and a critique of political economy; and, finally, it refers to fairness, friendship (brotherhood of man), and compassion (human need) in the rational organization of production, distribution, and consumption of the natural and social wealth of the community. That is, justice promotes the creative development of human powers and capacities within an egalitarian and democratic polity. And, as in the case of Aristotle, it provides for a synthesis of ethics and politics – virtue and the structures of politics and the economy. This definition of social justice integrates Aristotle's theory of virtue, the good life, human needs, and justice with Kant's theory of subjectivity, freedom, creativity, and human dignity. The contemporary debate within Analytical Marxism about the nature of justice in Marx's social thought does not take this range of issues into consideration. It limits the discussion of justice to its juridical and contractual meaning between labor and capital in the workplace outside of ethical and social theory. See Allen Buchanan, Marx and Justice: The Radical Critique of Liberalism (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1982), 50–85, Steven Lukes, Marxism and Morality (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 48–70, and George Brenkert, Marx's Ethics of Freedom (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 15–21.

On the other hand, both Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 52–62, 152–164, 172, 195, and 258–259 and A Short History of Ethics (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1966), 199–214, and Agnes Heller, Beyond Justice (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 74–115 recognize that, with the birth of modern Enlightenment liberalism and individualism, moral philosophy and its questions of virtue, character, intelligence, and morality have been separated from traditional socio-political justice and its concerns for the nature of the law, friendship, political community, and moral economy; ethics has been separated from social and political theory; modern individualism from the virtuous good life; and, finally, moral philosophy from sociology and social justice (MacIntyre, p. 23). These forms of separation are expressions of the theoretical incoherence and prejudice of liberalism. Kant, too, had unintentionally expressed this underlying contradiction of modern moral philosophy in his separation of practical reason and justice (law). The objective spirit or substance of morality has been lost to practical reason and conscience. According to Heller, the tradition of Hegel and Marx sought to end this ethical dualism: “Modernity threw itself back into antiquity to keep the ethico-political concept of