

The Ethics of Exploitation

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Philosophical inquiry into exploitation has two major deficiencies to date: it assumes that exploitation is wrong by definition; and it pays too much attention to the Marxian account of exploitation. Two senses of exploitation should be distinguished: the 'moral' or pejorative sense and the 'non-moral' or 'non-prejudicial' sense. By demonstrating the conceptual inadequacy of exploitation as defined in the first sense, and by defining exploitation adequately in the latter sense, we seek to demonstrate the moral complexity of exploitation. We contend, moreover, that moral evaluation of exploitation is only possible once we abandon a strictly Marxian framework and attempt, in the long run, to develop an integral ethic along Godwinian lines.

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1. Introduction

This paper analyses and evaluates social exploitation or exploitation as a feature of human relations. It is not concerned with environmental exploitation or exploitation as a feature of ecological relations. The latter issue is of great importance, and may be related to the former issue in some significant way: perhaps (anthropologically) the very notion of exploiting our natural environment is only conceivable in a socially exploitative context; and perhaps (economically) environmental exploitation requires human exploitation.¹ Unfortunately, we must leave such issues aside for now and try to make some moral sense of social exploitation as such.

What is indisputable is that (social) exploitation is, for the most part, a highly pejorative term: nobody wants to be 'exploited', and we seldom if ever recognise the right of somebody to 'exploit'. However, exploitation is

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¹ An important study of such ideas is (Bookchin 1991).

also a rather complex concept, and a much more problematic moral issue than is immediately apparent. We seek, therefore, to answer two questions in this paper. First, what is exploitation? And, second, what, if anything, is wrong with it? Before we answer these questions, however, we need to pay a little attention to the dominant intellectual tradition of thought on exploitation, namely Marxism. This is a tradition towards which the author feels simultaneously indebted and antipathetic. Such an attitude (at least with respect to the Marxian account of exploitation) will be explained, if not justified, in the next section.

2. Marxism and Exploitation

Two aspects of Marx's account of exploitation should be distinguished, though they rarely are: its intuitive appeal and its explanatory value. The intuitive appeal of his account derives from common moral intuitions concerning exploitation rather than anything morally significant that Marx says—or is trying to say—about it. Indeed, the very point here is that Marx is not making any substantive moral claims about exploitation (or about capitalism in general). (However, if we insist on reading Marx as a moral thinker, we would have to conclude that he believes that “capitalist exploitation is just.” Wood 2004, 138)² For Marx, exploitation is essentially a descriptive term of social science, not a normative term of moral philosophy. If we interpret it in the latter sense, this implies that we have a moral interest in the phenomenon that Marx describes, or that we intuitively disapprove of it in the cases that

² This is so because justice is determined, according to Marx, on the terms of a given mode of production. Capitalist exploitation is justified in a capitalist society. For Marx, there is no higher moral standard. But Marx does not believe that moral discourse can tell us anything *fundamentally* interesting about capitalism and its historical development. Indeed, he is indifferent to the ethics of capitalism and exploitation.

Chapters 9, 10, and 16 of Wood's book provide a particularly interesting discussion of these issues. For an alternative, “moral” reading of Marx's account of exploitation—or what I take to be a moralized account of exploitation in a Marxian key—see (Arneson 1981). The main point that Arneson makes is the following (Arneson 1981, 208): “In numerous texts Marx employs rhetoric that strongly suggests he strongly believes the exploitation of capitalist and other class societies to be morally wrong. In some of these passages Marx offers broad hints as to why he regards exploitation as wrong. But he neither develops these hints nor explains their basis.” Even if there are moral suggestions and hints in Marx's writings (in fact, *there are*), this does not mean that Marx is engaging in moral philosophy or that he thinks highly of it. He clearly does not, and is concerned to approach the issue of exploitation in a different, “scientific” way. See also G.A. Cohen's review of Wood's book (Cohen 1983). Cohen defends a moral reading of Marx, arguing that because Marx describes capitalist exploitation as a form of “theft” (on terms other than its own), he must have a moral point in mind. However, such pronouncements strike me as rhetorical (as Arneson believes) and as inessential to Marx's intellectual project.

Marx seeks to understand (principally, the alleged exploitation of labour in capitalist society). However, for Marx, our disapproval adds nothing to our understanding of exploitation; on the contrary, it leads us off into *mere* ideological dispute (moral philosophy and the like). Now, one might reject Marx's position here: one might defend moral philosophy against ideological charges; one might deny the non-normativity of what Marx is talking about. But in doing this, one simply moves away from Marx. This is fine in principle, but it leaves one wondering why some who do so still cling on to Marx: why they need him at all, at least for the purposes of substantive moral discourse.

Two related answers to this question may be noted: the ideological and the authoritative. In the first place, one's ideological commitment to Marx and Marxism might compel one to investigate all issues—including those to which Marx was indifferent or even hostile—with reference to the ideological master himself. If Marx provides exact answers to all questions, or at least *holds the key* to the solution of all problems, then moral inquiry into exploitation must begin with him. In response, one might simply argue that unquestioning ideological commitment has no place in philosophy. However, even those who are uncommitted in this sense may avail of Marx as some kind of intellectual authority, or, at any rate, the most notable intellectual who had anything interesting to say about exploitation. But the fact that Marx had something significant to say about exploitation does not make him any kind of ethical authority or even ethically relevant here.

With respect to the explanatory value of Marx's account of exploitation, we have little to offer. There is a widespread view (shared by certain neo-classical economists and analytical Marxists) that Marx's explanatory account—of the exploitation of labour for profit through the appropriation of surplus value—is undermined by its reliance on the labour theory of value as “an antiquated tool which does not hold up against modern standards of generality and rigour.” (Roemer 1986, 199)³ But the success or failure of Marx's (supposedly scientific) theory has no bearing on our ethical discussion. As Jonathan Wolff writes, “The truth of [exploitation] does not depend on any particular theory of value or profit.” (Wolff 2002, 117)⁴ The

³ Other analytical Marxists like Allen Wood dispute this view.

⁴ For a very readable introduction to Marx's theory of exploitation, see pp. 66–81 of this work. The major analytical Marxist study of exploitation is (Roemer 1982). Such work has, of course, been challenged by other, more traditional Marxists: “rational choice Marxists have been criticised... for their apparently excessive individualism and taking for granted what can only be explained by more structural concepts... The fact that Marxist social scientists borrowed methods employed in neoclassical economics such as game theory and general equilibrium theory was, to say the least, paradoxical... and it is not surprising that not much of Marx survived” (McLellan 2007, 388).

phenomenon of exploitation persists, and we intend to subject it to ethical examination.

In large part, then, what we will analyse and evaluate is precisely what Marx sought (and arguably failed) to explain. Indeed, our use of the same paradigmatic examples below (of exploitation in labour relations) may suggest that we have not escaped the Marxian framework at all, that we are somehow constrained by Marxian categories, however we might go about obfuscating them ideologically (that is to say, ethically). Nevertheless, discussing the same phenomenon (*among others*)—in fact, discussing it *in a different way*—does not indicate actual dependence on (or implicit commitment to) the “original” (Marxian) account. Marx has no further role to play in this paper.

3. What is Exploitation?

A common conception of exploitation is that it consists in the “unfair use” of other human beings (Arneson 2001, 515). In Alan Wertheimer’s words, then, “An exploitative transaction is one in which *A* takes unfair advantage of *B*.” (Wertheimer 1996, 207)⁵ While Wertheimer acknowledges that “exploitation’ can be employed in a nonmoral sense”, or in a “nonpejorative sense”, he works with what he calls a “moralized concept” of exploitation according to which exploitation “is, by definition, wrong because unfair”. Having established (or merely asserted) this “(moral) fact of exploitation”, he points to two vital questions concerning exploitation in its various forms: its “moral weight”, that is, how wrong it is, and its “moral force”, that is, what its moral “upshots” are for those involved and for society as a whole (Wertheimer 1996, 5–6).⁶

The questions that Wertheimer raises are doubtless important. But can we be satisfied with his basic conception of exploitation as “taking unfair advantage”? There are at least two problems with it. In the first place, it would seem to be over-extensive. There are acts (say, cases of murder) that meet the definition without (at least intuitively) constituting acts of exploitation (unless we can exploit a human life as such).⁷ Secondly, and more seriously,

⁵ I draw extensively on the work of Wertheimer here, notwithstanding my disagreements with him. See Robert Goodin’s critical review of Wertheimer’s book (Goodin 1997).

⁶ The definition of exploitation in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Second Edition, 1989) captures the distinction between its moral and non-moral senses. Thus, in the latter sense, exploitation is “The action of...turning to account”, while in the former sense, it is “The action of turning to account for selfish purposes, [or] using for one’s own profit.”

⁷ Richard Arneson concedes as much: “it would be incorrect usage to apply the term “exploitation” to immoral acts that are rightly described as involving unfair use but that also fit a narrower of more odious concept. For example, murdering someone would not be characterized as exploitation even though the murderer profits [or *may* profit] from the

this conception of exploitation rests on the moral *assumption* that exploitation is “unfair”.⁸ Such a conception rests on a negative connotation—or the pejorative usage—of exploitation without demonstrating its conceptual adequacy. In like manner, one might define domination, for example, as the unfair control of other human beings. But the unfairness of such control needs to be demonstrated, not merely asserted (as definitional of domination). And there certainly seem to be cases of justifiable domination (for example, the physical restraint of a violent drunk). Might not this also be true of exploitation?

Exploitation in itself denotes no more than utilization or beneficial use. And we might *conceivably* utilize ‘resources’ (including so-called ‘human resources’) in a fair way, even when such use is to our own advantage (relatively, at least). How might we define social exploitation in a way that leaves the moral question (about its ‘fairness’, justifiability, and so on) open? In general terms, it would seem to involve *the advantageous use of other persons*. But, more systematically, we can claim the following:

Exploitation is a form of social power (of effective capacity in human relations) which involves the capacity of party *A* (the exploiter) (i) to benefit from some characteristic of party *B* (the exploited),⁹ and (ii) to do so at party *B*’s expense.¹⁰

There are three features of exploitation on this definition which need to be explicated (two from (i), the third from (ii)): (a) the characteristics of *B* from which *A* might benefit; (b) the benefits to *A*; and (c) the losses to *B*.

(a) The characteristics of *B* from which *A* might *benefit* include those ‘positives’ which might be exploited, such as productivity, talent, and attractiveness, as well as a number of ‘negatives’ which might be similarly exploited, such as poverty, physical or psychological dependence, and ignorance. Thus, in positive terms, the employer might exploit a productive

act and thus unfairly uses the victim” (Arneson 2001, 515).

⁸ By contrast, Ruth J. Sample’s conception in (Sample 2003) rests on the assumption that exploitation is “degrading”. In his critique of her work, Wertheimer makes a point that might also be directed at me: “I am not sympathetic to Sample’s conceptual “essentialism”, to explaining what exploitation “is”... The important task is to identify the way in which transactions can be wrong and what we should do about them, not what words we should use” (Wertheimer 2007, 259). While the dispute over “unfairness” and “degradation” might amount to a semantic quibble, the dispute over whether the concept of exploitation should be ‘moralized’ (or subjected to heavy moral stipulation) in any way does not. On this issue, see (Wood 2004, 242–46).

⁹ “Common to all exploitation... is that *A* makes a profit by turning some characteristic of *B* to his own advantage” (Feinberg 1988, 176).

¹⁰ “An exploitative exchange is... an exchange in which the exploited party gets less than the exploiting party, who does better at the exploited party’s expense” (Levine 1988, 66).

employee, while, in negative terms, the rich might exploit the desperately poor.

(b) The benefit in question is usually material, though it is conceivable in other terms: psychological, sexual, “spiritual”, and so on. Hence, the psychologically, sexually, or spiritually “strong” might exploit the psychologically, sexually, or spiritually “weak”. In general terms, the exploiter benefits in the way of power, whether this power consists in possessions and wealth or psychological, sexual, or spiritual dominance. Indeed, it is arguable that exploitation is premised on unequal relations of power: that to exploit, one must occupy a position of greater relative power in the first place (however localized this power might be). If this is so, inequality of power might generate greater inequality of power. Accordingly, we observe that money begets money, for instance.

(c) Crucially, what *A* gains in an exploitative relationship represents a *loss* of some kind to *B*. (Were *B* to lose nothing, it would be senseless to claim that *B* was being exploited.) We should consider this loss in both material and non-material terms. Two cases spring to mind: the loss of “the full fruit of one’s labour”, and the loss of one’s “dignity”.

In material production, understood as the production of ‘wealth’ in accordance with (real or apparent) ‘human needs’, *A* might benefit (say, make a profit) through the labour of *B*. In such a situation, *B* might be held to lose either the product of his labour or the full value of his labour (receiving either a subsistence or more substantial wage in return). As such, *B* would be exploited by *A*. This remains the case even when we maintain that *B* receives a “fair day’s wages for a fair day’s work”. The difference here would merely be that the degree of exploitation is smaller and perhaps more obviously ‘fair’ or justifiable. Moreover, the exploitative relation between *A* and *B* holds whether the mode of production is capitalist or communist (leaving slave, feudal, and other economies aside). The difference between capitalist and communist exploitation is that *B*’s loss is private gain (‘profit’ in the ordinary sense) in the former case and public gain (for the ‘common weal’) in the latter.

Non-material or cultural aspects of exploitation are more difficult to analyse than material or economic aspects.¹¹ Moreover, the attempt to prioritize one aspect over the other (usually the latter over the former, in accordance with the ‘materialist conception of history’, for instance) is fraught with difficulties. But what *B* appears to lose when non-materially exploited is his or her ‘dignity’, a loss that is entailed by a process of ‘humiliation’. (What

¹¹ It might be observed that the analysis of non-material exploitation is more characteristic of the liberal tradition, while the analysis of material exploitation is more characteristic of the socialist tradition.

A appears to gain from *B*'s loss is simply power of some kind. For example, *B*'s humiliation might lend *A* a sense of superiority or of prowess.) Of course, labour might be humiliating in itself, even when it is well rewarded in material terms. Accordingly, a prostitute or stripper might be highly paid but still exploited (non-materially). Indeed, sexual exploitation in its widest sense (based on, for example, the domestication or objectification of women) is a major category of non-material exploitation, though it has a material aspect too (in the exploitation of the domestic and even non-domestic labour of women in particular). Another category of non-material exploitation is "spiritual" exploitation. Thus, we witness religious and cult leaders exploiting the psychologically weak (and usually exploiting them materially too).

How are we to make sense of the loss of dignity? We can interpret dignity (rather simplistically for current purposes) as consisting in the 'equality (of value) of persons', or the recognition of the same. Where inequality of personhood is manifested, or the recognition of basic equality is lacking, dignity is lost. Non-material exploitation and humiliation are the very antithesis of 'dignified existence' and equality of personhood.

We will conclude our analysis of exploitation by noting four important elements that, while they may be present, are not necessary for exploitation to occur. One is *manipulation*. It is sometimes argued that one cannot be exploited unless one is somehow duped into giving up something that might benefit another. One might, say, convince a naïve child to undertake valuable menial labour with the offer of a bag of sweets (in the traditional parental manner). However, there are clear cases of exploitation—that of the slave, for example—where a factor other than manipulation is compelling: here coercive force overrides the need to manipulate the exploited party.

Another unnecessary element is *coercion* itself. While the slave owner coerces his slaves in order to exploit them, other examples of exploitation seem to be non-coercive. Most exploitative instances of labour under capitalist conditions are thought to be non-coercive; such relations appear to be entered into voluntarily out of 'rational self-interest'. (This is not necessarily the case with labour under communist conditions, by contrast.) This point about capitalist employment does, of course, assume that meaningful alternatives are available to the exploited party, such as less exploitative or non-exploitative means of survival. However, even work in the non-profit sector is problematic in this context. One can, after all, be exploited for benefits (even material benefits) other than profit (such as the higher salary of one's superiors in non-profit organizations, which may be non-materially exploitative in any case).

A third unnecessary element of exploitation is *vulnerability*. This seems problematic since we have claimed that exploitation *may* be premised on

inequality of power, and since many exploited parties (children, the sick, etc.) are indeed vulnerable (economically, physically, or psychologically). The “weak” would seem to be vulnerable. However, many exploited parties are in positions of some strength (while still less powerful overall than the exploiting party), and these positions render them less than vulnerable. Thus, a technical expert in some field can command particularly good working conditions, while he remains a source of profit for his employer. Moreover, he may have the real possibility to work elsewhere, though also in a profit making capacity. Systematically, therefore, he can be said to be vulnerable; but he is not necessarily so with respect to specific transactions.¹²

A final unnecessary element of exploitation is *harm* to the exploited party.¹³ While exploitation is often detrimental to the exploited party’s interests or well-being, it need not necessarily be so. Indeed, again in the context of employment under capitalist conditions, the fact that one is materially exploited need not harm one’s interests in consumption. Indeed, outside of capitalist economy, many of these interests (assuming that they are still felt) may not be satisfied at all. Or, spiritually, the fact that a religion may exploit one’s psychological weaknesses may not be (felt to be) harmful; indeed, the exploitative religion may more than adequately compensate for one’s weaknesses (or, at least, one may be under the consoling illusion that it does so). In either case, the absence of the exploitative relation may be detrimental to one’s interests—though, of course, we might look for a less exploitative third option.

A potential objection to our analysis ought to be considered before we move on to the evaluation of exploitation. It might be granted that the “moralized” concept of exploitation is too expansive and too assertive. But one may question whether the “nonmoral” concept ultimately serves us any better—and, indeed, whether the very concept of exploitation is useful at all. Doubtless, the nonmoral concept is less assertive; this is precisely what makes it nonmoral. But is it less expansive? Does it describe so much that it becomes descriptively useless? One might be inclined to argue that all social interaction involves the capacity of one party to benefit from a certain characteristic of another party and to do so at the latter’s expense; or, in other words, to argue that all social relations are exploitative. But while it is true to say that many social relations are exploitative (and that such matters are descriptively or sociologically troublesome), it would seem unjustifiably reductive to say that all of them are exploitative. Are we willing to claim that

¹² I diverge on this point from Wood (see, in particular, Wood 2004, 254–55).

¹³ On the second and fourth elements, Feinberg notes: “exploitation... can occur in morally unsavoury forms without harming the exploitee’s interests and... despite the exploitee’s fully voluntary consent to the exploitative behaviour” (Feinberg 1988, 176–79).

all instances of friendship are exploitative, for instance? If so, then what are the losses that are incurred by the supposedly exploited “friend” in all such instances? In any case, that exploitation is a widespread phenomenon on our analysis does not diminish the analysis. Exploitation *is* a widespread phenomenon. Our purpose has simply been to analyse it—to pin it down to the extent that such a widespread phenomenon can be pinned down—in order to evaluate it.

4. Is Anything Wrong With Exploitation?

We can only offer a brief and preliminary evaluation of exploitation here. But it should be noted that our purpose is not to show why and when exploitation is ‘unfair’ (or to question the moral ‘weight’ and ‘force’ of exploitation as ‘unfair use’) but to ask the less prejudicial question as to whether or not it is justifiable. Furthermore, it should be emphasised that our aim here is not to equivocate over some kind of social abuse, still less to justify the unjustifiable. The author is no apologist for capitalism: I am particularly hostile to neo-liberalism, for example. Nor is the author morally indifferent to human suffering and injustice: my position could be broadly characterised as a libertarian humanism. But there is good reason to seek to comprehend what we intuitively oppose. Such comprehension can lend greater weight to our convictions, though it requires intellectual effort and may require that we modify our views.

In evaluating exploitative practices and institutions, at least three kinds of moral argument can be called upon. The first kind leads to the conclusion that exploitation is unjustifiable. The second kind indicates that certain forms of exploitation are justifiable. And the third kind can lead in both directions. The three kinds of argument are, in turn, (a) *deontological*, (b) *voluntaristic*, and (c) *consequentialist*.

(a) The Kantian ‘deontological’ argument *against* exploitation has it that it is *always* wrong to treat human beings (or rational agents) as means to an end, or, specifically here, as instruments of power or profit.¹⁴ The advantageous *use* of *B* by *A* is wrong, irrespective of the consequences, that is, the losses that *B* may incur. While this argument has some appeal—especially with respect to issues of dignity and the more extreme cases of exploitation (such as slavery)—it may be held to preclude too much in the way of real human practice. It seems to preclude all forms of employment (other than self-employment) and even any kind of division of labour. Every division of labour may be said to be exploitative: to benefit some at the expense of oth-

¹⁴ Of course, this is not the only kind of deontological argument, but it is particularly relevant in the discussion of exploitation.

ers, even if such a situation is mutually beneficial. Indeed, this would seem to point to an instance of *mutual exploitation*. Thus, in a case where parties *A* and *B* cooperate and apply their respective skills in the pursuit of a goal, *A* may be said to exploit a positive characteristic of *B* while *B* simultaneously exploits another (or conceivably the same) positive characteristic of *A*. What *A* and *B* gain in this situation may be a superior product of labour, a lessening of the effort required to produce it, and greater leisure time. What they lose is arguably the full fruit of their *own* individual labour. This would not disturb most of us in principle, but the ‘mutual use’ of rational agents might worry an extreme Kantian.

(b) Voluntaristic arguments concerning exploitation maintain that it is justifiable if and only if it is consented to (again, irrespective of the consequences or losses incurred). That is to say, if one freely and knowingly chooses to enter into an exploitative relationship, then that relationship is legitimate. We argued, above, that coercion is not a necessary element of exploitation and that exploitative relationships could, in principle, be voluntarily entered into. Thus, on voluntaristic terms, exploitation is justifiable in some instances. However, it is clear that not all exploitation is consented to: the slave has no choice, the child may not know any better, and so on. Moreover, the degree of consent evident in relations of capitalist employment (to return to the example cited above) is open to question. Do we consent to being instruments of profit for the capitalist employer, or are we forced to do so in some sense after all? What are the likely consequences of dissent? Do these suggest that there is a meaningful choice available? Many would be troubled by voluntaristic instances of, and justifications for, ‘self-sacrifice’, ‘self-abnegation’, and ‘prostitution’ in a very broad sense. The obvious moral objection is that the voluntaristic doctrine concerning exploitation is morally vacuous, at least in cases that are judged to be socially problematic or matters of genuine public concern.

(c) We might evaluate exploitation solely with reference to its consequences, some of which (like ‘social utility’) might be held to be justifying. Thus, irrespective of issues of ‘dignity’ and consent, exploitation might or might not be justified. There are, of course, problems with this line of reasoning. Firstly, quite how we assess these matters (making, for example, ‘interpersonal comparisons of utility’) is questionable. And, secondly, this approach would seem to conflict with certain cherished moral intuitions (about the rights of individuals, for instance). Are we really to accept the sacrifice of the individual (say, the exploitation of the worker) to social well-being (expressed, say, in terms of ‘economic growth’)? And if we are not, according to the utilitarian, why not? These are complex issues that have bedevilled utilitarians, at least, for many years.

Argumentation about these matters could conceivably combine elements of the different ethical approaches. We could, for example, adopt a consequentialist approach, limited by certain moral intuitions (about human freedom and dignity). Indeed, this leads us in the direction of the author's own approach to the problem. That is not to say that arbitrary pluralism is advocated as a solution here, but that an integral ethic might enable us to handle the problem—and many more moral problems besides. Thus, one might subscribe to something like the Godwinian ethic. William Godwin attempted to develop an account of justice that integrated social utilitarianism with the principle of private judgement.¹⁵ Justice, according to him, consists in social well-being, but can only be determined in each and every instance by the autonomous agent. Exploitation, on this account, is unjust because it is (a) socially divisive and (b) irrational. (This does not mean, however, that it is unjust *by definition*.) Needless to say, there are philosophical problems here which cannot be ignored, but Godwin (who is, it should be said, no mere eclecticist or dialectician) provides an example of firm opposition to social exploitation on complex moral grounds. While his account may be overstated and appear to preclude too much of the necessary and desirable, it does demonstrate the possibility of confronting the problem of exploitation with sophisticated moral weapons. These weapons, however, require further development, and such development is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. Conclusion

This paper consisted of three parts. In the first part, we claimed that it was necessary to advance beyond the Marxian account to a general normative account of exploitation. In the second part, we offered a non-prejudicial and non-moralized definition of exploitation. And in the third part, we pointed to the moral complexity of exploitation and suggested that an integral ethic would have to be developed for its proper evaluation. Overall, our intention was not to propose a solution to the problem of exploitation, but to show that the issue is still live, both with respect to its analysis and especially its evaluation. Exploitation is not wrong by definition, and it is not obvious why it is wrong in every instance.

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¹⁵ See (Godwin 1793).

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