My dissertation is a study of Karl Marx’s reflections on philosophic method. I argue that Marx’s method undergoes a series of definite, well-reasoned changes during the period 1841-46, culminating in a subtle methodological naturalism concerned to explain rival theories away as illusions given rise to by objectively misleading appearances. Marx’s reasons for modifying his method are more sophisticated than has previously been recognized. I reconstruct two overlooked arguments, in Marx, against rival methods for philosophy, both of which charge their targets with enjoining a kind of excessive doxastic conservatism. I also reconstruct Marx’s early and mature methods, showing how they determine the fine-grained argumentative structure of the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* and *The German Ideology*, respectively.

Marx comes from an unusually methodologically self-conscious philosophical milieu. His dissertation concerns metaphilosophical themes in Democritus and Epicurus, and most of the debates in which he is embroiled early on are metaphilosophical in character. It is no surprise, therefore, that Marx’s reflections on method should constitute the backbone of his philosophical program. Nevertheless, these reflections have been neglected by readers of Marx. This owes to various factors. First, many of Marx’s readers have insufficient training in logic to grapple with his arguments. Second, those with the proper training (e.g. the Analytical Marxists) have been specially averse to talk of an “alternative method,” and have been weak on points of history.

Marx’s reflections on method are best understood as contributing to a broader, mid-19th-century effort, among German followers of G.W.F. Hegel, to develop a tenable naturalistic method for philosophy. This project is motivated, among contributors to the so-called “critical tradition” in philosophy, by the idea that traditional, non-naturalist methods for philosophy are somehow excessively conservative in their approach to received ideas. The charge is this: traditional methods
sometimes retain commitments just because they are traditional or received, or because they strike observers at a given time and place as obvious or commonplace. The charge of conservatism, therefore, amounts to the charge of dogmatism—of taking claims on board without argument.

In the **first chapter**, I introduce the method championed by Marx’s dissertation supervisor, Bruno Bauer. I call this method “Rational Explication.” Marx often treats Rational Explication as Hegel’s method, but this is incorrect: where Hegel’s method is backward-looking, retrospectively identifying the rational structure and progressive trend in the knowledge we already possess, Bauer’s proposed method is forward-looking, prospectively transforming (or *explicating*) our concepts in order to improve upon their rational adequacy. I show how Rational Explication arises in the context of the critical tradition in philosophy—a tradition that subjects every arbitrary authority to rational scrutiny, retaining only what survives criticism. In particular, I show how Rational Explication corrects against the shortcomings of a less sophisticated toy method, modeled loosely on the methods favored by G.W. Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and Moses Mendelssohn.

Rational Explication takes shape in two elements: a procedure for arriving at new theories or conceptual frameworks, and a procedure for justifying such discoveries. The practitioner of Rational Explication holds that we should identify logical and semantical inconsistencies in received frameworks by careful analysis of their concepts; then, we should move by a special, necessary but ampliative mode of inference (i.e. “explicative inference”) to an improved successor framework. I give a broadly neo-Kantian account of how such inferences can be understood as *necessary*, drawing on Bauer’s writings: the constitutive norms of rationality do not allow that we should countenance an inconsistency; thus, confronted with a claim that seems to describe the world aptly, but gives rise to inconsistencies, we *must* (deontic “must”) modify that claim to
eliminate its inconsistencies, while retaining as much as possible of its meaning. On the side of justification, Rational Explication evaluates candidate frameworks just in terms of their coherence.

Marx begins, under the influence of Bauer, by accepting Rational Explication. In the course of his early studies, however, he recognizes a problem for the method. I introduce Marx’s argument against Rational Explication in the second chapter. Marx argues that, though Rational Explication sets out to correct against the conservatism problems facing earlier methods, it introduces a new conservatism problem of its own. In particular, though Rational Explication corrects against the inconsistencies in the frameworks it criticizes, it preserves some of their representational errors (i.e. empirically false commitments) across explications. Marx refers to these retentions as “accommodations.” I refer to the argument as a whole as Marx’s “Accommodation Argument.”

I show that both F.W.J. Schelling and Ludwig Feuerbach develop versions of the Accommodation Argument prior to Marx. Marx, however, improves upon these earlier formulations of the argument by more clearly distinguishing between two charges: (1) Rational Explication fails to correct against representational error; and (2) this becomes a conservatism problem insofar as Rational Explication requires, of necessity, that errors be retained across explications. At the end of the chapter, I develop a further generalization of Marx’s argument, showing that, relative to certain assumptions, both the paradox of analysis and the Accommodation Argument are special cases of the paradox of inference. I argue that any procedure of discovery that takes successor frameworks to emerge by necessity from their predecessors—even procedures that successfully correct against representational error—will run into conservatism problems.

Marx, however, fails to carry out this further generalization of his argument. He does not recognize, therefore, that it is the necessity of Rational Explication’s procedure of discovery that leads to its excessive conservatism. In his first effort to correct against that conservatism, therefore,
he instead targets Rational Explication’s other shortcoming: its failure to correct against representational error. In the third chapter, I reconstruct Marx’s first proposed replacement for Rational Explication, which I refer to as “Genetico-Critical Explication.” On this early method, Marx retains Rational Explication’s necessary-inference-based procedure of discovery, but adopts a new, naturalistic procedure for justifying proposed modifications to received frameworks.

On Genetico-Critical Explication, we demonstrate the adequacy of our successor framework not just by establishing its improved coherence, but also by showing that it contains the descriptive resources necessary to explain its predecessor away as an illusion given rise to by misleading appearances. In practice, this requires demonstrating that the successor framework can match the explanatory successes of the predecessor, while also explaining how the predecessor goes wrong. Marx derives this procedure of justification (i.e. “genetic exculpation”) from Feuerbach’s writings. Feuerbach, however, tends to explain past frameworks away as subjective error on the part of the observer. Marx, by contrast, explains the apparent plausibility of received frameworks away in terms of objectively misleading appearances in our shared environment. Thus, we take fire to be a stuff or substance, rather than a show of light produced by pyrolysis, not because we are culpably inept as observers, but because it really looks that way (i.e. like a stuff).

In the concluding section of chapter three, I turn to Marx’s “On the Jewish Question,” and show how Genetico-Critical Explication shapes Marx’s strategy of argument. I also identify an initial problem for Genetico-Critical Explication: it seems to require that there be exactly one element, in the successor framework, responsible for explaining each individual inconsistency or error in the predecessor framework. This imposes an inappropriate numerical constraint on the structure of candidate successor frameworks, and embodies a conservative problem of its own.
In the **fourth chapter**, I show how my reconstruction of Marx’s early method allows us to better understand the argumentative structure of the *1844 Manucripts*. In particular, I argue that Marx’s central argument in the *1844 Manuscripts* is enthymematic, depending on two hidden premises. The overarching argument consists in an application of Genetico-Critical Explication to the classical political economy of, e.g., Adam Smith. Marx identifies inconsistencies in classical political economy, then moves by necessary inference to a successor framework that corrects these inconsistencies while retaining as much as possible besides. He then deploys the descriptive and explanatory resources of the resulting framework to explain classical political economy away as an illusion given rise to by misleading features of the world describable from the new framework.

This argument, however, turns centrally on conceptual resources—Marx’s concepts of essence, species nature, life activity, and so on—that one cannot plausibly derive just through explication of classical political economy. Thus, I argue that Marx’s overarching argument depends on two hidden premises. It presupposes Feuerbach’s explication of Hegel, which Marx takes over as his own; and it presupposes Marx’s explication of Feuerbach, which remains largely implicit in the *1844 Manuscripts*. I reconstruct these two arguments, both of which also conform to the pattern of Genetico-Critical Explication, to show how Marx’s broader argument hangs together. I conclude by identifying another problem for Genetico-Critical Explication: because it takes new frameworks to emerge by necessity from their predecessors, it places too-strong limits on the materials we can draw upon in articulating new frameworks. Marx, who is a wide-ranging thinker, struggles against this limitation, hence the somewhat tortured structure of his arguments.

Marx abandons Genetico-Critical Explication by the time of *The German Ideology*. He never makes explicit why he elects to do so. In the **fifth chapter**, I reconstruct an argument that Marx is in position to give against Genetico-Critical Explication, given some of the conclusions
he draws in *The German Ideology*. In particular, I argue that some of Marx’s more obscure criticisms of Bauer and Max Stirner turn on the view that certain metaphors or analogical models are systematically unfruitful for making sense of human cognition and practice. Marx criticizes two models: one that envisions knowledge as imposed upon us or guaranteed from without (i.e. “the philosopher’s stone”) and one that envisions thought as a practical power, responsible for bringing about changes in the world (i.e. “the myth of creation”). Marx criticizes theories or frameworks that show signs of relying on these models, holding that they *probably* contain errors.

I reconstruct Marx’s criticism of the philosopher’s stone by turning to its likely source in Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity*. I show, in particular, that Marx criticizes the philosopher’s stone for the reason that it recommends excessive conservatism: it trains us to think of certain beliefs or concepts as exempt from rational scrutiny. I demonstrate how Marx’s criticism of the philosopher’s stone bears on naïve forms of empiricism, bringing out an analogy between his criticism of this model, and more recent criticisms of unfruitful analogical models by Wilfrid Sellars and Karl Popper. I then show how Marx’s criticism of the philosopher’s stone bears on Genetico-Critical Explication. I argue that Genetico-Critical Explication involves recourse to the philosopher’s stone, and that it is clearly its necessary-inference-based procedure of discovery that involves this recourse. Because Genetico-Critical Explication allows that the truth at which we will arrive in the fullness of time is in some sense contained already, as necessary consequence, in the framework from which inquiry begins, it treats certain commitments as immune to criticism.

I argue that, having arrived at his reasoned suspicion of the philosopher’s stone, Marx is in position to recognize his earlier oversight with respect to Rational Explication: that it is its necessary-inference-based procedure of justification, not just its failure to correct against error at the level of representation, that leads to its excessive conservatism. This conclusion speaks against
Marx’s early effort to retain a necessary procedure of discovery, and thus speaks against Genetico-Critical Explication. Now, this is not a knockdown argument: Marx can conclude, based on the fact that Genetico-Critical Explication involves recourse to the philosopher’s stone, only that it probably involves errors of the sort typical of the philosopher’s stone. Establishing this decisively would require closer scrutiny of the method itself, as in my generalization of the Accommodation Argument above. However, this shift away from knockdown a priori arguments toward arguments based on probabilities is consistent with Marx’s broader shift to a naturalistic method.

Having rejected Genetico-Critical Explication, Marx introduces a second, mature alternative to Rational Explication. I call this method “Exculpatory Naturalism.” In the sixth chapter, I give a detailed reconstruction of Exculpatory Naturalism. I argue that Marx preserves, on his mature method, the naturalistic procedure of justification he favors on his early method. Thus, he still holds that justifying a proposed successor framework requires demonstrating its representational superiority over its predecessor by showing that it contains the descriptive and explanatory resources necessary to explain that predecessor away as an illusion given rise to by objectively misleading appearances. I show that this ties neatly in with Marx’s claim, in the “Theses on Feuerbach,” that we should evaluate the truth of our theories in terms of their practical import. More exactly, I argue that Marx holds a theory to be more practical than another just in case it is better able to identify the real mechanisms responsible for producing practical outcomes.

Though Exculpatory Naturalism retains its procedure of justification from Genetico-Critical Explication, it adopts a new, non-necessary procedure of discovery, eschewing reliance on the philosopher’s stone. In particular, Marx introduces a new procedure, which he refers to as “abstraction,” and I identify as abductive inference. Note that abduction, in the context of discovery, differs from inference to the best explanation (IBE) in the context of justification. Thus,
the practitioner of Exculpatory Naturalism arrives at new theories through the exercise of a special imaginative capacity, drawing upon previous learning only heuristically. On Exculpatory Naturalism, therefore, we arrive at candidate successor frameworks by abduction, and then establish their continuity with previous frameworks by explaining the predecessors away as illusory. This exculpates past philosophers by representing them as good-faith inquirers whose best efforts to arrive at the truth are waylaid by objectively misleading evidence.

By establishing this continuity between predecessor and successor frameworks, Genetic Exculpation arrives at an answer to a problem that faces any method for philosophy that proposes to modify our concepts. It must answer the question how answers framed in the conceptual vocabulary of the successor framework can intelligibly respond to questions framed in the vocabulary of the (presumably substantially different) predecessor framework. Call this the “Continuity Problem.” Rational Explication and Genetico-Critical Explication answer this question by showing that, if we only reflect on the predecessor framework for long enough we will arrive, by necessity, at the successor framework. Thus, the modified meanings on the successor framework are, in some sense, already present in the predecessor framework. This is one of the major virtues of these methods: they provide especially clear answers to the Continuity Problem.

The continuity established between predecessor and successor frameworks on Exculpatory Naturalism is much weaker than that established on Rational Explication and Genetico-Critical Explication. First, it is established only retrospectively, from the perspective of the successor framework. It shows that, in some sense, the predecessor framework follows from the successor framework (i.e. as one possible appearance given rise to by the reality described on the latter framework). It does not establish, however, that the successor framework follows from the predecessor. Nevertheless, Exculpatory Naturalism requires that its proposed successors do not
unintelligibly change the topic with respect to relevant predecessors: the advocate for the successor can rely upon the method to explain, to a skeptical interlocutor, exactly what the intelligible relation between the two frameworks is. Some committed non-naturalists will still find this insufficient. I explain this difference in judgment away in terms of underlying epistemic stances.

In the seventh chapter, I turn to Marx’s application of his mature method in *The German Ideology*. In particular, I argue that he arrives at his mature theory of culture by abduction, and then employs it to criticize (but also exculpate) his philosophical rivals. I hold that Marx’s principal first-order concern is with scientific anthropology, and in particular with ethnology—the branch of anthropology devoted to identifying the invariant or cross-cultural processes responsible for giving rise to the differences and similarities between cultures. Marx’s view is that all of a culture’s ethnological attributes (i.e. its patterns of consumption and distribution, its institutions, its rituals and traditions, even its kinship relations) can be explained in terms of its pattern of economic production. I call this theory, as it figures in Marx, “ethnological productionism.”

Marx’s theory of ideology is part of his broader ethnological productionist theory of culture. In it, he explains the preponderance of current modes of thought in terms of their corresponding conceptual frameworks’ responsiveness to how things appear. He explains those appearances, in turn, in ethnological productionist terms: because our society has such-and-such pattern of economic production, its social and institutional patterns take such-and-such form, and things look, to everyday participants in the culture, to be one way rather than another. Thus, Marx takes the appearances to be both (1) objective; and (2) explainable. Ideology, on Marx’s view, just is belief responsive to the appearances. It follows that ideology always falls short of the truth. Marx denies that which ideological beliefs we hold determine practical outcomes, in part because the
view that the ideologists control history falls prey to the other misleading analogical model Marx criticizes: the myth of creation. He holds, instead, that production patterns select for ideology.

Marx relies on his ethnological productionism, and his theory of ideology in particular, to criticize his philosophical rivals. Thus, he employs Exculpatory Naturalism to show that the frameworks endorsed by philosophers like Bauer and Stirner are responsive only to the appearances. This involves identifying these frameworks as ideological. It is important, however, that the theory of ideology is part of Marx’s specific proposed successor framework. Thus, to call a framework ideological is to draw that framework under a definite empirical category (i.e. to locate it in the broader nexus of Marx’s ethnological productionism). “Ideology” is not the general term for predecessor frameworks, or for frameworks found to be inadequate, on Exculpatory Naturalism. This means that “ideology” is not an epistemological or metaphilosophical category.

I conclude the dissertation by showing that Marx employs Exculpatory Naturalism, along with his mature ethnological productionism and theory of ideology, to explain his own earlier conceptual framework (i.e. the one he defends in the *1844 Manuscripts*) away as an illusion given rise to by misleading appearances. Marx is quite allergic to self-criticism, but his commitment to the critical tradition in philosophy requires that he subject his own mistakes to criticism. He resolves the tension between these factors by attributing his own earlier views to others, then subjecting those figures to criticism. In this case, Marx attributes his own earlier views to Feuerbach, Stirner, and the so-called “True Socialists.” He then argues that these figures’ framework commitments are ideological, thus responsive only to the appearances. By extension, this exculpates Marx himself, and establishes continuity between his early and late views.