
KARL MARX ON HUMAN NATURE

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Marx had very little sympathy with Utilitarianism.¹ One of the reasons for his disapproval was that this "doctrine of utility" thrives on a form of intellectual bankruptcy. Utilitarians, faithful to the empiricist tradition and its distaste for abstract reasoning, first profess, implicitly or explicitly, their skepticism towards any knowledge regarding the nature of man and then go on to dictate what is wholesome and useful to man. This, Marx suggests, is insane. In *Capital*, while criticising Jeremy Bentham, that "genius in the way of bourgeois stupidity",² Marx makes a very intriguing remark: "To know what is useful for a dog", he writes, "one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility." Marx's point is clear. It is irrational to dogmatise on what is useful to anything without first understanding correctly what you are talking about. Insight into, and a critical analysis of, the "nature" of something should anticipate any attempt to decide what is useful or harmful to it. This applies in a special manner in the case of human nature. Marx argues:

He that would criticise all human acts, movements, relations etc., by the principle of utility, must first deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as modified in each historical epoch.³

Marx's position is strikingly similar to the one manned by the Scholastics. It is a position initiated by the ancient Greek thinkers, in particular Aristotle with his emphasis on knowledge by the ultimate causes.⁴ The problem is, however, that Marx, though definitely committed to a position

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1. In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels write: "The apparent stupidity of merging all the manifold relationships of people in the *one* relation of usefulness, this apparently metaphysical abstraction arises from the fact that, in modern bourgeois society, all relations are subordinated in practice to the one abstract monetary-commercial relation." Cf. *The German Ideology*, Part One with selections from Parts Two and Three. Ed. by C.J. Arthur. Lawrence and Wishart, Lond 1970, p.109. All quotations from this work are taken from this edition which will henceforth be referred to as G.Id.
 2. K. Marx: *Capital*, Vol. I, S. Moore & Ed. Aveling translation, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1970, p.610. Henceforth referred to as C.I.
 3. *ibid.*, p.609, n.2.
 4. In Bk 2, ch.2 of the *Physics* Aristotle writes: "Men do not think they know a thing till they have grasped the "why" of it (which is to grasp its primary cause)."

more traditional than some of his commentators are willing to admit,⁵ hasn't been very explicit with his own views on human nature. Perhaps it was due to the fact that he was more interested and involved in practical rather than academic problems. Whatever the reason, the metaphysical presuppositions and ramifications of his whole doctrine on man have to be painfully extracted, by implication, from the whole corpus of his writings. Among these the "early" works are more amenable to philosophical analysis than the "later" ones.⁶ The aim of this paper is to expound and discuss briefly Marx's conception of "human nature in general".

In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* Marx gives two definitions of man, namely, 1) as a "being for himself" and 2) as a "species-being". These two conceptions, though complementary, deserve separate treatment.

1. A "being for himself"

In order to appreciate this conception it is vital to bear in mind that Marx draws a crucial distinction between "so-called nature" and "humanity's own nature".⁷ This distinction is different from the one found within traditional dualism with its polarity between matter and mind, body and spirit. Nevertheless, Marx's distinction does imply a type of duality. One finds within his conceptual frame-work an expanded view of "Nature" which encompasses both human and non-human matter and a dialectical relationship between the two. For Marx, man is matter which thinks. "*Man*", he says, "is directly a *natural being*. ... As a natural, corporal, sensuous, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited being, like animals and plants." However, Marx adds, "man is not only a natural being; he is a *human natural being*; i.e. he is a being for himself..."⁸ The contrast between a "being for himself" and, what one can term, "a being for external nature", that is, a "mere natural being", is worth noting. As a

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5. The French commentator L. Althusser, for instance, argues that "in 1845 Marx broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man." He contends further that Marx rejected "the essence of man as his theoretical basis." Cf. *For Marx* Pantheon Books, New York, 1969, p.227-228. There is little, if any doctrinal basis for Althusser's opinion.
 6. There is widespread disagreement on the problem of the continuity in the evolution of Marx's thought process. My own personal research and studies convince me that there is a basic doctrinal continuity between the early and the later works. Althusser's alleged "epistemological break" is for me totally unacceptable. Though in his later works Marx concentrated on more empirical generalisations, he never abandoned the metaphysical frame-work implied in his early works and underlying his whole systems.
 7. K. Marx: *Grundrisse*, Trans, by M. Nicolous. Pelican Marx Library, 1973, p.488. Henceforth referred to as *Grundrisse*.
 8. K. Marx: *Early Writings*, The Pelican Marx Library, 1975, p.389 — 391. Henceforth referred to as E.W.

“natural being” man needs and depends on “external nature” for his very existence; as a “being for himself”, this dependence is qualified by man’s own *human* nature. Marx’s argument is that of all the existing creatures the human being alone enjoys a degree of freedom from the “physis”, that is, from the immediacy and rigidity of physical laws.⁹ Marx’s conception is clarified somewhat when he contrasts human with animal activity. He writes:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It is not distinct from that activity; it is that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity.¹⁰

According to Marx, therefore, the human being is different from the animal in so far as the former is able to keep a certain “distance” from his natural environment and physical activity because he is able to “stand out” in his subjectively conscious existence. In his relationship to “external nature” man remains the point of departure and the point of return. The human being is, therefore, “auto-telic” — he is the aim of his own existence and this is precisely the meaning of the expression “a being for himself”. The animal, by contrast, is in immediate contact with physical nature; it is ruled despotically by natural laws and its behaviour dictated by its instincts. This idea is further confirmed when Marx says:

It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the beaver, the ant, etc. But they produce only their immediate needs of those of their young; they produce one-sidedly, while man produces universally; they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need; they produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature; their products belong immediately to their physical bodies, while man freely confronts his own product.¹¹

It is this element of “freedom” from the immediacy of the “physis” that enables man to “interfere” with the laws of nature and manipulate the natural environment, for better or for worse. In the *Grundrisse* Marx draws our attention to the fact that human productive activity entails the imposition of the “human will over nature”.¹² This vital idea is reiterated in *Capital*:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the constructions of her cells. But what distinguishes the

9. This is confirmed by Marx’s negative attitude towards Positivism.

10. E.W. p.328.

11. *ibid.* p.329.

12. *Grundrisse* p.706.

worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will.¹³

What deserves special attention here is Marx's view that man "also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi* and to which he must subordinate his will." Herein lies the germinal idea, running throughout Marx's whole system, that man is determined by his own "logos" developed by means of his own practical and conscious activity. This forcefully brings out the role of the intellect and of "theoria" within Marx's system. He explicitly makes the *will* subordinate to the *intellect* — a major postulate within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. It is in the perspective of this conception that we can fully appreciate the vitality and significance of Marx's contention that "men (are) both the authors and actors of their own drama."¹⁴

In summary then, one could say that by defining man as a "being for himself" Marx acknowledges in man an element of transcendence from physical necessity.¹⁵ He therefore rejects psychologism, economism, technologism and any other form of narrow determinism.

2. A "species-being"

Although Marx uses the expression "species-being" extensively, he never fully explains, in clear and unambiguous terms, what he meant by it. This is unfortunate because the "species-being" conception is of great strategic importance within his system. Accordingly, a misconception on this matter inevitably leads to a host of problems and to subsequent distortion of Marx's doctrine. The dialectic of negativity, causality and finality in Marx's system, alienation, exploitation and class-struggles, as well as his envisaged millennium, to mention a few of the major ideas, cannot be understood and appreciated correctly without a thorough grasp of what Marx understood by "species-being".¹⁶

To comprehend fully Marx's conception we have to keep in mind what we discussed earlier. We saw that man enjoys a measure of freedom from

13. C.I. p.178.

14. K. Marx: *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Inter. Pub New York, 1971, p.115.

15. Marx's position on this matter is reminiscent of a basic tenet within the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition.

16. We are not interested in the origin and historical background of this expression. Our interest lies in its conception and role in Marx's system.

the "physis" in the sense that man's "life-activity" is not a "determination with which he directly merges." This "freedom" is to be interpreted neither as a state of self-sufficiency and self-identity in the Fichtian sense of "I am I",¹⁷ nor as an endorsement of the Cartesian position. For Marx, the freedom from the "physis" which man enjoys necessarily expresses and realises itself in a *social and formal milieu*. *Man's life is thus a mediated one*. This is clearly implied when Marx writes:

As soon as the first animal state is left behind man's property in nature is mediated by his existence as a member of a communal body, family, tribe, etc... by his relation to other men, which determines his relationship to nature.¹⁸

To reiterate, the freedom from the *immediacy* of the "physis" is simultaneously a life *mediated* by a social and formal phenomenon. The emphasis Marx makes on "mediation" is obvious to anyone acquainted with his works. This "mediation" expresses itself according to the syllogistic formula, P-U-I. The example Marx himself gives of the negro slave illustrates this point. "A negro", Marx says, "is a negro. In certain circumstances he becomes a slave."¹⁹ The three terms of the syllogism are clear. We have the "negro" as a real *individual* of the black races enjoying his nature as a human being; the "slave" which we can regard as his particular "formality" and the "certain circumstances" as the *middle term* or universal in and through which the identification between the "negro" and the "slave" obtains. The case of the negro slave, found originally in the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* reappears in a more elaborate form in the *Grundrisse*:

Society does not consist of individuals, but expresses the sum of interrelations, the relations within which these individuals stand. As if someone were to say: Seen from the perspective of society, there are no slaves and no citizens: both are human beings.

Rather they are that outside society. To be a slave, to be a citizen, are social characteristics, relations between human being A and B. Human being A, as such, is not a slave. He is a slave in and through society.²⁰

For Marx, accordingly, man is a type of being that "formalises" or idealises his physical existence in a social context and remains bound by his "formalisations". Man is not only a thinking-animal but an animal that is ruled, to some extent, by his thoughts. The implication of this is that what keeps people in communion and relationship with each other, whether in peace or in war, is not instinct or any other physical or mere psychological factor but a complex net-work of social or formal relations based on

17. Cf. Marx's remark on this matter in *Capital*, Vol. I, p.52, n.1.

18. K. Marx's *Theories of Surplus Value*, part III, Trans. by J Cohen and S.W. Ryazanskaya. Progress Pub. Moscow, 1971, p.378.

19. C.I. p.766, n.3.

20. *Grundrisse*, p. 265.

the prevailing physical conditions of existence. The "formalisation process" — a process by which people give an "ideal" or formal dimension to their empirical existence — goes on unconsciously and the end result ossifies into an ideological superstructure: "theory, theology, philosophy, ethics, etc."²¹ This process is possible because, as seen earlier, man has subjective consciousness. To quote Marx again on this important point:

Man is a species-being, not only because he practically and theoretically makes the species — both his own and those of other things — his object, but — and this is simply another way of saying the same thing — because he looks upon himself as the present, living species, because he looks upon himself as a *universal* and therefore free being.²²

Man's consciousness, therefore, is not an epiphenomenon, a mere shadow or reflex of matter in motion. The thought-process is *distinct* though not separate from the brain-process. Marx's doctrine, therefore, rejects the reductionism of the Identity theory without accepting ontological dualism. Admittedly, Marx's position is difficult and elusive but not irrational.

By characterising man as a "species-being" Marx wants to emphasise the *social* basis and character of the "formalisation" that goes on throughout human existence without sacrificing its *subjectivity* in relation to the individuals concerned. This subjectivity is what distinguishes "species-consciousness" — an exclusively human prerogative — from the herd-consciousness found among gregarious animals. In *The German Ideology* it is argued that initially, that is, when man first appears on the world scene, the beginning of consciousness is "as animal as social life itself at this stage. It is mere herd-consciousness, and at this point man is only distinguished from sheep by the fact that with him consciousness takes the place of instinct or that his instinct is a conscious one."²³

The implications of the above are far reaching. If the end result of human consciousness, namely, the various "formalisations", both infra- and super-structural, which mediate human existence and behaviour, (including man's productive activity), are of an *epistemological* rather than a *psychological* nature, they have to be acknowledged *intellectually*, even if uncritically, by the individuals concerned before they can be influenced by them. For example, it is only because and to the extent that one acknowledges the formal relationship of dependence between "master and servant" that one considers oneself and behaves as "master" or "servant" respectively. This formal relationship, Marx points out, cannot obtain in the case of animals.

21. G.Id. p.52.

22. E.W. p.327.

23. G.Id. p.51.

Basically the appropriation of animals, land etc, cannot take place in a master-servant relation, although the animal provides service. The presupposition of the master-servant relation is the appropriation of an *alien will*. Whatever has no will, e.g. the animal may well provide a service, but does not thereby make its owner into a master. 24

A careful study of Marx's system shows that, in his conceptual framework, the "formalisation-process" within human existence is *inevitable*. To be human is synonymous with leading a "formal" existence concomitantly with a physical existence. The "species" notation precisely refers to this formal and social dimension. Though inevitable, the *character* of this formal dimension and the subsequent identification of the individual subjectively with the totality of prevailing "formalities" account for the state and degree of his human fulfilment or estrangement. Throughout history, there have been, Marx claims, various *types* of formal or social totalities mediating, in their respective way, human existence:

The relations of production in their totality constitute what are called the social relations, society, and specifically, a society at a definite stage of historical development, a society with a peculiar distinctive character. Ancient society, feudal society, bourgeois society are such totalities of production relations, each of which at the same time denotes a special stage of development in the history of mankind. 25

If man's life is a mediated one a lot depends on the character of the *medium*. If the *State* is regarded as essential to human existence, as happened in ancient Greece and Rome, then one's *political* status as "citizen", "freeman" or "slave" becomes the deciding factor in an individual's existence. If one's *birth* in a particular estate or caste. (as was the case in the feudal system and Asiatic societies), is formalised officially, then one's *sociological* status as noble, clergy, craftsman, serf or peasant etc. becomes dominant. Likewise, if *wealth* in the form of capital is formalised and turned into a social idol, a golden calf to which human existence and the natural environment are sacrificed in idolatrous worship then one's *economic* status as "proprietor" or "worker" obtains an essential dimension and individuals are assessed and treated accordingly: "You are worth as much as the money you possess." For Marx this last situation represents the era of capitalism which celebrates the rule of money over man and the environment.

Marx's conception of man as a "species-being" is the perspective for a correct interpretation of his doctrine on alienation. Alienation is a state of existence of the human race not yet fully developed. Alienation is not a phenomenon that appears only within the capitalist era. There is wide-

24. *Grundrisse*, p. 500-501.

25. K. Marx: *Wage Labour and Capital*, Progress Pub. Moscow, 1970, p.28.

spread confusion on this matter within Marxist scholarship. For Marx, the human species was "born" in alienation, is moving away from alienation, but this state of estrangement will persist until man's formal existence, the social milieu with which he identifies, in and through which he fulfils and realises himself becomes adequate; until, that is, man will formalise himself, his *humanity* instead of his political status, his sociological status or his economic status. When man outgrows the domination of these fetishes over his life, a phenomenon which becomes possible only by changing and developing his productive and economic activity, i.e., through material progress, he will discover himself and his dignity *directly* and not *by proxy* as happened throughout history.