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Essence and Alienation: Marx's Theory of Human Nature*

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ABSTRACT: Marx's theory of human nature has been frequently misinterpreted. Theorists argue that Marx saw human nature as fluid. Other theorists fail to see human nature's necessary connection to Marx's theory of alienation. The validity of Marx's theory of human nature, and alienation, are contingent upon a mutual acceptance. One cannot fully defend Marx's theory of alienation without accepting his theory of human nature, and vice versa. This necessary interconnection emerges from examination of Marx's trans-historical views on human nature, when compared critically with mainstream theories of Marxian human nature. The key to understanding Marx's theory of human nature entails a distinction between essence and essentialism, and their connection to a theory of expression. Marx is an essentialist in regard to human nature, but sees human essence as an ensemble of socio-historical relations. These particular relations shape human nature's expression.

THE SCHOLARSHIP ON MARX'S THEORY of human nature is conflictual. The texts where Marx mentions human nature, human essence, essentialism, and uniquely human attributes have been accessible to scholars for over half a century, yet many readers of Marx have radically different interpretations of these texts. Some scholars argue that Marx's theory of human nature is historical, and that human nature is different in different modes of production. This is one of the more popular readings of Marx, which I will call a historicist reading. Others (*e.g.*, Althusser, 2006) believe there was

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an epistemological break that occurred between the young and the old Marx, and that the mature Marx rejected all essentialist theories. Finally, some argue that Marx's theories of history and economics are not incongruent with a trans-historical (*i.e.*, the same at all moments in history) theory of human nature, but that there is a dearth of scholarship on what exactly is trans-historical about human nature. I want to propose my own positive theory about what Marx thought human nature was. Theorists have positioned themselves in one of these three camps, but very few have actually attempted to spell out explicitly what Marx's trans-historical view of human nature actually was. Even those that say Marx does not reject a theory of human nature (*e.g.*, Geras, 1983; Callinicos, 1984) have written almost nothing on what Marx's theory of human nature actually is. The aim of this essay is to do just that, and then to show human nature's essential relationship with Marx's theory of alienation. In addition to arguing that Marx held a trans-historical view of human nature, I also aim to show that human nature is a *necessary* condition for demonstrating that alienation does occur in capitalist society, and presumably any other society that suppresses the better parts of species-being.

My argument will be threefold. First, I will show that Marx held to a trans-historical view of human nature, and in so doing I will specify what that view positively entails. Second, I will show how Marx's theory of alienation and human nature are interconnected, with the perversion of a trans-historical human nature serving as the necessary condition for the realization of alienation in capitalist society. Finally, I will argue that Marx's trans-historical essentialism is not in contradiction with his views in the sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, that "the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality, it is the ensemble of the social relations" (in Engels, 2010, 82). Traditionally theories of essentialism combined with non-enduring essence are not seen as compatible. I do not think this incompatibility obtains for a dialectical thinker like Marx. I argue that recognizing the validity of this combined position allows us to see that while society conditions our historical essence, it is our essential human nature that is alienated. Moreover, our essential/trans-historical human nature is a necessary foundation for historical alienation. In order to justify these three arguments, against previous interpretations of Marx's theory of human nature, I will first

clarify the competing readings, and then offer a common-ground suggestion for readers to use in deciding which interpretation of Marx's work is most prudent.

Competing Readings of "Human Nature"

Several camps have been established in the Marxism and human nature debate. Given these different camps it would be helpful to have a definition of human nature which is unifying. "Human nature" ought to be defined as an attribute of the human species that is uniquely/distinctly human. Therefore, hunger would not be an aspect of our distinctly human nature. Human nature can also be historicist or trans-historical. It may be the case that we have unique attributes that exist at all times in all moments of history (trans-historical), or it may be the case that what is uniquely human is also correspondent to a particular mode of production (historicist). The proffered definition of human nature does not rule out any of these competing camps too hastily.

There is the Althusserian camp, which believes essentialist philosophies and Marxian theories of human nature are something the mature Marx rejected. Any claims about a universal essence are primarily ideological (Althusser, 2006, 4987). The Althusserians could agree that human nature is what is uniquely human, and then argue that there is in fact nothing trans-historically unique about human beings in general. Instead history is a process without an essential subject, and so attempts to clarify and figure out what is uniquely human are confused at best, and ideological mistakes at worst.

Another camp is the one that claims that Marx's theory of human nature is historicist (D'Amato, 2006, 18–34; Sayers, 1998, 3–14; Sayers, 2011, 78–101). Each individual has a human nature, but it is contingent upon time and place, and is subject to change. Individuals who occupy radically different places in history have different human natures. Again, members of this camp can accept my proffered definition and still use it to fortify their arguments; *e.g.*, what is uniquely human is different for humans in slave society, feudalism, capitalism, and/or socialism, and human nature could even be different based on one's class location within a mode of production. There is therefore no trans-historical human nature.

Finally there is a camp of thinkers who argue that Marx did have a positive view of human nature, but what that positive view was has not been wholly fleshed out (Geras, 1983).

Many prominent Marx scholars have rejected a Marxian theory of human nature: “Tom Bottomore, Robert D. Cumming, Eugene Kamenka, Louis Althusser, Vernon Venable, Robert Tucker, Kate Soper, Colin Summer, and Sidney Hook; to name but a few” (Geras, 1983, 4951). One way to refute this claim is to show that throughout Marx’s life, in all his theoretical works, he held fast to an enduring theory of human nature. In analyzing his theoretical works we ought to remember that human nature is that quality that is *distinctly* human. Distinctly human qualities are qualities that separate humans from non-human animals. Traits that *we share* with other animals (*e.g.*, thirst) are merely *aspects of our animal nature*, even if they sometimes take on a different form from other animals. Thus, any theoretical speculation that Marx makes regarding the uniqueness of humans has a use-value in interpreting his theory of human nature.

Marx’s Comments on Human Nature

Before undertaking a chronological examination of Marx’s quotes on human nature, it is necessary to state why this procedure is important. Many of the authors that have discussed Marx and human nature have often held fast to a single quote or set of quotes, or have attempted to establish an ontological or epistemological break in Marx’s theory. My general aim here is to show that Marx actually maintained a view of human nature (as defined above as that which is uniquely human) from his earliest writings all the way through *Capital*.

Due to space, some of Marx’s excerpts on human nature will not be quoted; not all of his comments develop his theories of human nature and species-being in a new direction from the works preceding and following it (*e.g.*, *On the Jewish Question*). It is important to put forth Marx’s views in chronological order, so that one can see what is maintained in Marx’s philosophical development. Many philosophers, most often Althusserians, believe that the sixth Thesis on Feuerbach marks an epistemological break for Marx, negating his previous views of human nature. However, by reading Marx in chronological order, it can be shown that Marx made use of a theory of human nature even after the sixth Thesis. Thus, this supposed epistemological break

certainly did not prevent Marx from holding onto a concept of human nature. And even if an epistemological break of sorts did occur, a theory of human nature was maintained.

Marx's 1844 *Notes on James Mill* were his first writings dealing with human nature. These notes mark the first development of his theory of species activity:

Species-activity and the species-spirit whose real, conscious and authentic existence consists in social activity and social enjoyment. Since the essence of man is the true community of man, men, by activating their own essence, produce, create this human community, this social being which is no abstract, universal power standing over against the solitary individual, but is the essence of every individual, his own activity, his own life, his own spirit, his own wealth. (Marx, 1844, 265–6.)

Marx is saying here that the human essence is the ability to *produce* within a community in a way that serves the community and oneself. When *camera obscura* productive relations (*e.g.*, capitalism) begin to take effect, “our products are not united for each other by the bond of *human nature*” (Marx 1844, 275):

Let us suppose that we had produced as human beings. In that event each of us would have doubly affirmed himself and his neighbor in his production. (1) In my production I would have objectified the specific character of my individuality and for that reason I would both have enjoyed the expression of my own individual life during my activity and also, in contemplating the object, I would experience an individual pleasure, I would experience my personality. . . . (2) In your use or enjoyment of my product I would have the immediate satisfaction and knowledge in my labor I had gratified a human need, *i.e.*, that I had objectified human nature. . . . (3) . . . I would have directly confirmed and realized my authentic nature. . . . Our production would be as many mirrors from which our natures would shine forth. This relation would be mutual: what applies to me would also apply to you. (Marx, 1844, 277–8.)

Marx believes that human nature and acts of production should not be wholly separated. Human beings have a natural disposition to produce products with spontaneous creativity, in a manner that is conducive to individual and social gratification. In producing a unique product, individuals affirm their *uniqueness*, and in distributing said product, they gratify others. And through that gratification

an individual can further gratify themselves. Simultaneously, the same producer depends upon the same relationship of unique production and exchange from someone else. Therefore what seems unique to them is in reality common to all human beings.

An example of this sort of unique productive behavior would be Ray Kurzweil's blind reader. The blind reader is a technological device that allows blind people to read certain texts. This was a device intended for someone else, someone other than Ray Kurzweil, but one that he derived great satisfaction from creating (Ikenson, 2004, 139–140). The ability to create products for other members of our species, which serves their needs (and not just our own), is part of what it is to be distinctly human, according to Marx. This trait is part of our human nature, since it is uniquely human.

Although the *Notes on James Mill* were written in Marx's early philosophical development, there is little theoretical variance from this position later on. Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (*EP Manuscripts*) mark the next stage of working through his theory of — among other things — human nature.

In the essay on “Estranged Labor,” Marx argues that economic determinants (*e.g.*, wages, capital, rent) pervert the best parts of human nature. Beginning with the affirmative statement of human nature, he writes (1844, 74): “Man is a species-being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but — and this is only another way of expressing it — also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being.” Marx goes on to compare the similarities between humans and animals, but notes a distinction, namely that humanity's “species character” is productive life “in the character of its life-activity” as free and conscious. That is, free production — production without anything but nature's material constraints — is what distinguishes the activity of humans from that of other species. Whereas life-activity for the animals is identical to the animal essence, free man makes life-activity “the object of his will and of his consciousness.” This distinguishing aspect makes humanity a species-being. One sees their species as an object that their free production will consciously and freely take into account, thus confirming their kinship as a species-being. The lexicon is different, and productive consciousness is added

in as a universalizing aspect of humankind's essence; nevertheless, the theme is congruent with Marx's *Notes on James Mill*.

One could object that Marx is incorrect to view production as a uniquely human activity. Other animals engage in productive activity. However, Marx argues that animal production is strictly for immediate need(s), whereas humans produce "even when [they are] free from physical need and only truly [produce] in freedom therefrom." Marx is strengthening his point that whereas the life-activity of animals is fixed, people's life-activity when free is a confirmation of their species-being *via* their freedom to produce objects that transcend mere subsistence needs (Marx, 1844, 76). Ultimately, one's freely produced product is the objective confirmation of their essence, and its reception in society is *a fortiori* objective confirmation of their species-being.

In 1845, Marx and Engels drafted their first book together: *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, trying to develop "the science of real men and their historical development" (Marx and Engels, 1845, 8). They refer to human nature in this book. When their views on human nature are read in connection with their scientific goal, it is safe to infer that the two thinkers believed that they could develop a science of humans that included the notion of human nature. They utilize the notion of human nature when referring to alienation in capitalist society:

The propertied class and the class of the proletariat present the same human self-estrangement. . . . The class of the proletariat feels annihilated in estrangement; it sees in it its own powerlessness and the reality of an inhuman existence. It is . . . abasement, the indignation at that abasement, an *indignation* to which it is necessarily driven by the contradiction between its human *nature* and its condition of life, which is the outright, resolute and comprehensive negation of that nature. (Marx and Engels, 1845a, 43; emphasis in original.)

They argue that the estrangement and degradation the laborer feels under capitalism is the antithesis of a flourishing human nature. Human nature is under capitalist labor relations. The importance of this passage is that Marx is developing his theory of human nature from his *Notes on James Mill* by combining it with his earlier developed theory of alienation.

The next text to consider humanity's essence can be found in the "Theses on Feuerbach," written in 1845. These were written on a single sheet of paper, never meant for publication (Engels, 1886, 8).

Critiquing Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* and his views of man, Marx wrote:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is consequently compelled: 1. to abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract — isolated — human individual. 2. Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as "genus," as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals. (Marx, 1844, 423.)

This note is *prima facie* a refutation of the previous views held by Marx regarding human nature/essence, and is therefore often clung to by Althusserians.¹ Yet this is the case only *prima facie*. For now the thesis is worth mentioning because it is *possibly* a view of human nature. The concept of essence has taken on a new meaning in Marx's work that should be *distinguished* from human nature. For many anti-essentialist Marxists, this is a point at which Marx's concept of essence is developing into anti-humanism, *i.e.*, a rejection of trans-historical human nature.

The next statement made by Marx regarding human nature can be found in *The German Ideology*, written in 1845–46. In *The German Ideology* Marx makes one statement regarding what is distinctly human:

Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organization. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. (Marx and Engels, 1845b, 42.)

Marx goes on to point out how the material world around people conditions what they can produce for subsistence. This part of the development of human nature is often cited by historicists. They see a

1 Norman Geras compellingly disagrees; Geras, 1983.

necessary and fluid relationship between our historical human nature and the changing of the external material world. Marx is making a general point though, that whereas a bird can only make a nest, and a bee can only make a hive, a human can build different types of homes in a diverse array of environments. Indeed, in order for one to begin to distinguish themselves *via* abstract thought and religion, their essence must initially be objectified in production, which requires its own subjective abstract thought. As Marx argues, “the production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and the material intercourse of men, the language of real life” (Marx and Engels, 1845b, 47). Initially this material activity is free and necessary production. Historically people are first and foremost producers. It is only later that they are religious and ideological.

Marx’s *Capital* is the culmination of decades of research which astutely brings together a lot of his earlier works into a comprehensible system. Although Althusserian Marxists argue for an epistemological break in Marx’s work, and historicists argue for a fluid theory of human nature, there are passages about human nature in *Capital* that are congruent with Marx’s previous views of human nature. For instance, in the beginning of *Capital* when Marx is distinguishing use value from exchange value, he states: “Labor, then, as the creator of use-values, as useful labor, is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself” (Marx, 1867, 133; emphasis added). The trans-historical aspect of this claim is important. For Marx use values are often historical. For instance, a blow gun has no use value for a pilot in Wisconsin, and an airplane would have no use value for a hunter-gatherer. What remains trans-historical, though, are humans’ creative laboring capacities and their need to labor. The degree to which people are creative in their labors is an attribute Marx believes is *uniquely* human.

David Harvey points out that “in his earlier works Marx made much of the idea of a distinctly human ‘species being’. . . . This idea takes a backseat in the formulations of *Capital*, but it does occasionally exercise a shadowy influence” (Harvey, 2010, 112). Marx’s chapter on “The Labor Process” recalls earlier statements he made regarding the uniqueness of humanity’s labor — especially compared to other animals — and universal aspects of species-being (*i.e.*, our uniquely

human trait). In the labor process, the human being “sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his body . . . in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. . . . he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature” (Marx, 1867, 283). Before proceeding, it is again important to note that *prima facie* this quote endorses the historicist reading, but only *prima facie*. Marx only states that the labor process changes our *nature* and not our *human nature*. Since he refers to our human nature at other points in the same work, this distinction should not be seen as arbitrary. The distinction is important, given the common-sense definition of human nature that is being used to assess these quotes. People’s *nature* can change, *i.e.*, they can switch from having a hunger for tomatoes to having a hunger for salmon, but their *human nature* has not been necessarily impacted. *Human nature* is what is uniquely and particular human. Our *nature* is what is generalizable about us, but not necessarily distinct from other animals. Marx follows the comment on our nature with a trans-historical comment on what is unique about the human labor process:

[Let us] presuppose labor in a form which it *is an exclusively human characteristic*. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But *what distinguishes the 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 realizes a purpose of his own that gives the law to his modus operandi, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman’s will be steadily in consonance with his purpose. This means close attention. The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more close his attention is forced to be. (Marx, 1867, 283–4; emphasis added.)

As Harvey argues, Marx is returning to his previous views, which can be found in *The EP Manuscripts* and the *Notes on James Mill*. Marx is indicating a dialectical relationship between the material world, ideas, and their fruition (or lack thereof). Within the labor process, the

material world loosely conditions what we can creatively think about and subsequently produce. For instance, the ancient Greeks cannot creatively design and produce an igloo, nor can the Inuit creatively produce the Parthenon. The actual act of ingenious fathoming is part of the creative element *that distinguishes humans from other animals*. It is in *Capital* that Marx reaffirmed this theory that human nature entails people's free and conscious productive capacity.

Marx makes one more reference to human nature in *Capital*, Volume I, in a chapter on the "labor fund" and the transformation of surplus value into capital. In a footnote critiquing Jeremy Bentham, he states:

The principle of utility was no discovery of Bentham. He simply reproduced in his dull way what Helvétius and other Frenchmen had said with spirit in the 18th century. To know what is useful for a dog, one must study dog-nature. This nature itself is not to be deduced from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would criticize 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. (Marx, 1867, 758.)

Marx argues that Bentham is representing humankind's relationship to philosophical thought categories as they appear in the present historical moment, not trans-historically. Historicists are guilty of a similar mistake. Utilitarianism is an imprudent way of improving the welfare of human beings, when it fails to consider that the capitalist mode of production is a *camera obscura* of human nature. No matter how utilitarian we make capitalism, human nature is not in conformity with the capitalistic labor process. Marx posits that the Utilitarians never consider "human nature in general," which would alert them to the harmful nature of capitalistic Utilitarianism.

Marx's comments on human nature found in the *Grundrisse*, Volume III of *Capital*, and *Theories of Surplus Value* are not divergent. When Marx's views on labor, species-being, human essence, and human nature are analyzed together, we come across some very consistent themes of what distinguishes humans from other animals. People can produce with ingenuity and should produce for free expression. Individuals' free and conscious production serves to gratify themselves and their fellow humans, and in so doing confirms what is distinctively

human. This is Marx's view of human nature. It is a view of human nature because it is a view about what is unique to the human species. Marx believes this unique laboring capacity of humans "is a condition of human existence which is independent of all forms of society; it is an eternal natural necessity which mediates the metabolism between man and nature, and therefore human life itself" (Marx, 1867, 133).

Alienation as Perversion of Human Nature

I will argue that a trans-historicist reading of Marx's theory of human nature allows for a strengthening of Marx's theory of alienation. Whereas a historicist would be hard pressed to say just what exactly is being alienated (if not human nature, then what?), and an Althusserian is forced to choose between two Marxist epistemologies (a false disjunction), a trans-historical reading has the benefit of fortifying the theory of alienation and being consistent with the totality of Marx's theoretical works.

In his essay on *Estranged Labor*, Marx argues that political economists do not study the economy from the point of view of labor. This oversight hides the alienating circumstances of production. For the capitalists, labor produces unprecedented luxury. For the laborer, labor produces privation, deformity, idiocy, and a cog-like existence (Marx, 1844, 71).

There are four specific components of Marx's theory of alienation. Alienation begins in the *act of production*. Marx (1844, 72) says that "the product is after all but the summary of the activity of production. If then the product of labor is alienation, production itself must be active alienation, the alienation of activity, the activity of alienation."

The second component for alienation to obtain is that production cannot be under the laborer's control. Capitalists and capital control the worker's productive life. The worker does not get to exercise their intrinsic nature in work, but takes orders from the alien forces of the market and their capitalist exploiter. The evidence Marx posits as proof of this aspect of alienation is that people avoid work "like the plague" once they leave the workplace. If spontaneous work is the consummate fulfillment of human nature, people ought to revel in it; but by being denied the best parts of their human nature, they recoil from more labor. Since what is essentially human is now negated, people therefore only feel free and active in their "animal functions

— eating, drinking, procreating. . . . what is animal becomes human and what is human becomes animal,” leading to “self-estrangement” (Marx, 1844, 72–3).

The third aspect of alienation is that individuals are alienated from their species-being. “In practice and in theory he adopts the species (his own as well as those of other things) as his object, but — and this is only another way of expressing it — also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a *universal* and therefore a free being” (Marx, 1844, 72–3). In capitalism, individuals no longer produce for their fellow species; this form of producing is foreign to them. One’s only reason for producing now is to satisfy their individual need for subsistence. In abstract political economy, and in the real world, workers now work for themselves as individuals, and not for their fellow humans. “Free, conscious activity,” as one’s characteristic form of labor, is nonexistent; labor is coerced, and since it is performed in a perfunctory manner, it ceases to be “conscious activity.”

The fourth aspect of alienation is a direct corollary of the previous problems. If one is alienated from their species-being, they are consequently alienated from their fellow species, *i.e.*, other humans. Marx (1844, 77) points out that, if “that man’s species nature is estranged [alienated] from” him, then it necessarily follows that he is estranged from other men, as all men share the same “essential nature.” And that essential nature is to produce as a species-being.

Marx sees alienated labor as a unique historical moment predicated upon specific social and material productive conditions. Alienated labor is not insurmountable, nor is it a necessary condition for social production. Historicists are right to point this out. Marx believes the act of producing one’s product for one’s fellow humans, of one’s own free and conscious volition, is an objective measurement of the consummation of one’s fulfilled life activity. If humans are a species-being, they can return to free production through class struggle. Marx retained this adamant view that humanity was not always alienated into his late years. Thus, he states in the *Grundrisse*:

What requires explanation is not *unity* of living and active human beings with the natural, inorganic conditions of their exchange of matter with nature, and therefore their appropriation of nature; nor, of course, is this the result of an historical process. What we must explain is the *separation* between these

inorganic conditions of human existence and this active being, a separation which is posited in its complete form only in the relationship between wage labour and capital. (Marx, 1857.)

It is the disunity of humans from their natural way of life that is fully consummated under capitalism.

In his essay on "Estranged Labor," Marx is taking the categories of political economy and negating them against his theory of species-being, *i.e.*, that aspect of our nature which is distinctly human. Thus, Marx is not seeing people as a mere social product devoid of trans-historical qualities (*i.e.*, he is not seeing humanity as a historicist Marxist would). If people were strictly social products, then there would be nothing *enduring or stable* to rebuff political economy against, because socio-political-economic relations would reflect the fluid nature of human beings. If one's *essence is just a reflection* of their social being, then there *is nothing for their essence to be alienated from*. Enduring (*i.e.*, trans-historical) human nature is thus a *necessary* condition for alienation.

I argue that human nature plays a necessary role in the Marxian theory of alienation. Marx argues that humans are alienated from the products of their labor, the act of production, their species-being, and their fellow humans. When one is alienated from their species-being, they are subsequently alienated from themselves. All four moments in the productive process lead to the obtaining of alienation. However, an enduring theory of human nature is necessary for a theory of historical alienation.

Marx's theory of alienation is contradictory if one believes that he holds no view of human nature. Moreover, human nature can serve as the backbone by which to critique capitalism. I see three reasons why this is true.

First, to posit that people are alienated from their species-being, is to posit that there is a trans-historical nature of humankind. If one's essence is nothing but the totality of one's social relations, as a historicist would argue, then one cannot possibly be alienated, *as there's no enduring thing to be alienated from*. Simply put, if Marx is not an essentialist, and believes there is nothing at root enduring in the human being, then the logical consequence of this view is that Marx believes individuals to be an absolute product of social conditioning. There is no dialectical relationship between human nature and

nurture which takes on different forms at different points in history. Individuals are strictly a mirror of their entire social ensemble. Thus, instead of being alienated from human nature, as Marx states, one can only be a unique product of their social environment. There is no enduring state of humanity on which to weigh the claim that people are alienated from themselves; and yet Marx makes this very claim.

The second reason why human nature is a necessary condition in Marx's theory of alienation, is found in Marx's argument that people are alienated from their fellow humans. If one loses the life activity of species-being, Marx explicitly concludes that they will be alienated from other humans, because this activity is in conformity with all humankind's essential nature. This means that if one were to again produce in a species-being fashion, then it would be in harmony with their essential nature. This leads to the subsequent conclusion that whether one is living under communism, or alienated capitalism, their essential nature is enduring. *What is changing is how this enduring aspect of human nature gets expressed.*

Third, individuals are alienated from the product and the activity of production. People produce products of alienation in a capitalist society. Since Marx believes this alienated activity is not a necessary condition for human production, he must believe there is an alternative (*i.e.*, socialism). Moreover, Marx argues that this alienated productive activity is leading to an animal-like existence, where what is specifically human is lost. All that is left is fulfillment of one's animal function (pleasure). At issue here is human productive expression, as *distinct* from our animal function. What does it mean to produce in a uniquely human way?

Human nature is that part of our nature which is unique to our species. Marx argues that free and conscious production, which expresses our species-being nature, is a uniquely human capacity. Alienation during productive activity denies humans an essential expression of their human nature. This denial perverts our human nature, leading us to only express our animal functions. To argue that people are *presently alienated* from their products, productive activity, species-being, and fellow humans, is to *heavily suggest* that what is *presently estranged* need not always be estranged. Indeed, for humans to realize the best of their inner nature, they ought to maintain a positive view of human nature; one that goes beyond our present particular form of alienation.

The Sixth Thesis — Essence and Essentialism

Detractors of a positive theory of Marxian human nature often point to the sixth “Thesis on Feuerbach.” A cursory reading of the thesis suggests Marx was a historicist, or conducting an epistemological break (*a la* Althusser). Indeed, John Bellamy Foster, quoting from *The Poverty of Philosophy* along with the sixth Thesis, concludes that “rejecting all essentialism (apart from the practical, transformative nature of humanity itself, as *Homo Faber*),” Marx gave us his sixth Thesis. “In other words, human beings did not consist of some fixed *human nature* residing in each individual, but rather, as he was to argue later, all history was nothing but the development (that is, self-development) of human nature through social intercourse” (Foster, 2000, 113). I argue that this reading is incorrect. If it were correct, we would have to give up on Marx’s theory of alienation.

The sixth Thesis is:

Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations. Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is consequently compelled:

1. To abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract — isolated — human individual.

2. Essence, therefore, can be comprehended only as “genus,” as an internal, dumb generality which naturally unites the many individuals. (In Engels, 1886, 82.)²

If essence is “no abstraction inherent in each single individual [but] in . . . reality . . . the ensemble of the social relations,” we must jettison the theory of alienation, because enduring human nature is a necessary condition for the existence of alienation. And according to a certain reading of the sixth Thesis, there is not an enduring human nature.

Seemingly there is a contradiction between this Thesis, and Marx’s later theoretical writings quoted above. However, Marx can

2 Normal Geras, in *Marx and Human Nature*, provides several analytically keen arguments against a historicist and Althusserian reading of the sixth Thesis. I will not reiterate those criticisms.

be defended from the appearance of contradiction by ironically getting at the essence of what he means by essence. There is no necessary contradiction in accepting both the sixth Thesis and Marx's latter claims.

A contradictory reading can be avoided if Marx is read as being an *essentialist* who sees an *overall essence, i.e.*, the totality of human essence, as fluctuating in human beings. What is essential to humans, *i.e.*, their species-being, is their creative and complex productive capacities that are capable of serving the needs of others. When their species-being is perverted they are alienated. In one sense Foster is right that humans are *Homo Faber*, but the way in which humans express *their enduring human nature* — fully, freely, and mostly consciously — is to be *Homo Faber* in a way that confirms species-being; contra Foster's view. Alex Callinicos (1984, 70), affirms this reading: "Under capitalist society, the worker is compelled to sell his strength and his skill to the capitalist. As a result he controls neither the products of his labor, nor his labor itself. What should be his life-activity, through which he affirms his humanity, or 'species-being', becomes a mere means to an end," and becomes alienated from his "human nature."

If this expression of human nature is what should qualify as part of what it is to be essentially human, then what should be made of the claim that Marx sees essence as always changing? For Marx, essence and essentialism are analytically distinct, but practically united. Essentialism is a necessary condition in how we are to view people's total historical essence. Essence is to be understood as human being's adaptation to their material circumstances, which are regionally unique and historically changing, *i.e.*, "the ensemble of the social relations." If we see essentialism's expression, against a social backdrop or ensemble, then these numerous phrases concerning individuals "developing" and "transforming" their "nature" can be synthesized. Human being's essentialism — that part of them that is enduring, *i.e.*, their human nature — is *expressed* differently in different social settings. However, our human nature is not expressed differently because it itself is different, but because circumstances, social relations, material factors, etc., are different.

The overlooked element in the debate about Marx's work and human nature is the notion of expression. How human nature is *expressed* in a particular socio-economic environment is going to *be a part of the total essence of man*. Human nature is a necessary condition

for having a broader essence.³ No matter what mode of production we find humans in, their human nature remains an *essential* component of their capabilities and needs; but its *expression* can be alienated, mitigated, or flourishing. When analyzing the essence of someone, we must consider the *expression* of their human nature in conjunction with the socio-economic particularities of a given historical moment.

Instead of seeing Marx as conducting some kind of epistemological break, or changing his mind about human nature and essence, we should see him as developing a new theory of essence in general. One of the final chapters in Volume III of *Capital* confirms why we should fight for an economic mode of production that allows our human nature to flourish:

In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labor which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases; thus in the very nature of things it lies beyond the sphere of actual material production. Just as the savage must wrestle with Nature to satisfy his wants, to maintain and reproduce life, so must civilized man, and he must do so in all social formations and under all possible modes of production. With his development this realm of physical necessity expands as a result of his wants; but, at the same time, the forces of production which satisfy these wants also increase. Freedom in this field can only consist in socialized man, the associated producers, rationally regulating their interchange with Nature, bringing it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by the blind forces of Nature; and *achieving this with the least expenditure of energy and under conditions most favorable to, and worthy of, their human nature.* (Marx, 1894, 959; emphasis added.)

Concluding Remarks

For anyone who wants to maintain Marx's theory of alienation, the third moment of alienation (alienation of the species-being) needs to be reconciled with his theory of human nature and essence. His trans-historicist views of human nature, combined with historical expression, can offer this reconciliation. Furthermore, we need to address the issue of people's essence under capitalism and recognize that although it is completely perverted, exploited, and alienated, *this essence of crippled*

³ This could be true even if one does not have a positive view of what human nature actually is. However, Marx does have a positive view, as outlined above.

humanity is not what makes us essentially human. Indeed, it is certainly not what separates us from other animals. As Marx notes, alienation is often an expression of our animal function. If we recognize human nature as our essential component and social relations as part of our historical essence, we solve the apparent riddle both in the contradiction of alienation and the contradiction of Marx's sixth Thesis. Finally, for those committed to critically changing society, if we can establish the scientific veracity of Marx's theory of human nature and alienation, then we have a vantage point from which we can consistently and objectively critique any unsatisfactory mode of production. If creative and social production is the hallmark of our human nature, and the flourishing of our nature is good, then it follows that any society that perverts our human nature is in need of transformation.

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