

HUMAN NATURE IN KARL MARX: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Okpanachi Elijah Ojochonu, PhD
Department of Philosophy
Kogi State University, Anyigba
Email: eltonia4u@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The measure of self-centeredness with which political actors operate at the international level is the primary motivation for this research. The research explores Karl Marx's conception of human nature within the context of his conception of socialism as an alternative to the excessive self-centeredness with which actors operate at the international level. Marx regards the human person as a unique, productive and natural being. In addition, he conceives the human individual as social, universal, free and creative by nature. Marx claims that the conditions of life which are common to human persons, their inward nature and their consciousness of it are all historical products. However, it should be noted that the human person has two fundamental natures. One is the individualistic, egoistic, avaricious nature. The other is the social, egalitarian and altruistic nature. Based on this, the aim of this research is to examine the Marxian concept of human nature as the ideal for the operations of men in a heavily dominated capitalist world. The analytic method is used to lay bare the concept of human nature in Karl Marx

Keywords: Human Nature, Socialism, Capitalism, Egoistic, Marxian

Introduction

Undoing the idea of self-interest as the sole motivation for political actors at the international level is the motivation for this paper. There is no doubt today we live in a capitalist world where individual self-interest constantly guides human actions. This capitalist mindset and outlook is manifested nationally within avowed capitalist nations like the United States and countries in Europe. In contrast to these capitalist nations, there are those who are socialist in outlook like Russia and China and their consequent concept of human nature as collective and therefore stands in opposition to the capitalist outlook. But the depressing reality is the fact that there is a point where these blocs of countries meet; at the international level, all these countries act primarily from selfish interest, whether capitalist or socialist. At this level, the model for intercultural dialogue is described as pragmatic-strategic communication by Fred Dallmayr. On this principle he contends that,

In pragmatic-strategic communication, each partner seeks to advance his or her own interests in negotiation with other parties. To the extent one can describe such communication as "dialogue," it takes the form mainly of mutual bargaining, sometimes involving manipulation and even deception. This kind of communicative exchange is well known in international or intersocietal relations

and constitutes the central focus of the so-called realist and neorealist schools of international politics. Prominent examples of such communication are trade or commercial negotiations, negotiations about global warming and ecological standards, disarmament negotiations, settlement of border disputes, peace negotiations, and the like. Much of traditional diplomacy is in fact carried on in this vein (Dallmayr 2007, 250).

From this then, one thing is clear both the capitalist and socialist nations are inherently self-seeking at the international level of their relationships. By this too, scheming/deception rather than trust constitutes the base of the relationship. Trust comes in only when it is convenient and it is quite clear the effect of deception as the basis for any form of relationship. This orientation is at the base of the realist theory in international relations. How trust can inform international politics as against deception and manipulation based on the egocentric view of human nature forms the basic motivation for this research.

At the base of this mode of operation is the understanding that man is purely a self-seeking being, that man is egocentric. Thus, egoism is at the base of the realist ideology in international politics. The Marxist conception of human nature raises an alternative to this egocentric understanding of man operative in current international dialogue. In this regard Marx understands a human person as a unique being, a productive being and natural being. In addition, he conceives the human individual as social, universal, free and creative by nature. For Marx, man is not just social, but also egalitarian and altruistic by nature. Consequently, man is by nature made for community. Thus, the high point of Marxian socialism is its severe and unrepentant criticism of the capitalist state for its promotion of the acquisitive and avaricious instincts of human person, which has resulted in social inequalities, the exploitation and oppression of the poor by the rich. It is this concept of human nature that this paper seeks to exploit in order to build a better and more human international order.

Philosophers on Human Nature

The most basic question in philosophy is this: What am I? The answer to this question is what the discourse about human nature in philosophy consists. In more specific terms, this discourse focuses on what it means to be a human being and what makes humans different from everything else and how this view affects how we see yourself, how we see others, and how we live. This discourse on human nature spans through a long period of philosophy's history. This I shall set out here with a view to developing the background to Marx's discourse.

Plato conceives a human person to be a composite of two elements. These are the soul or mind (a non-material and indestructible entity that can exist independently of the body) and body (which is material and destructible). According to Plato, the knowledge of the perfect, unchanging material forms is attained by the soul, not by the body. In his opinion, "the attainment of this knowledge by the human intellect will facilitate knowledge of the truth about how we should live. (Pato 1987, BK.4.4). Plato claims that the soul of each human person has the rational, the spirited and the appetitive parts. He maintains further that

depending on which part of the soul is dominant, there could be three kinds of men who would respectively or correspondingly desire knowledge success or gain. He holds that reason should control spirit (an element which he also refers to as indignation or anger) and appetite or desire (that is, all the physical desires such as thirst, sexual desire, and hunger). Plato is of the view that the just person is the one whose parts of the soul function harmoniously with the rational part in control. At the individual level justice is determined by the harmonious agreement between reason, spirit, and appetite in such a way that reason is dominant. (Plato 1977, 13-1, (65a-67e.) Plato observes further that each human person is by nature social in the senses in which he or she lives in a society and is not self-sufficient. Each person also has to benefit from the aptitudes, interests, training and experience of others. In addition, he or she has to join others in activities such as learning, play, art and friendship, among others. (Dorter 1982, 49) For Plato's student Aristotle, reason is also the human's highest power. Although in many ways Aristotle's view differs from Plato's, he also held that human reason can discover the truth about human nature and how we ought to live. Still, Plato held that the truth about human nature involved knowledge of another world of reality. Aristotle held that the truth about human nature required only knowledge of our own world. However, Aristotle agreed that our ability to reason is the characteristic that sets the human self apart from all other creatures of nature.

According to Aristotle, all living things have a purpose. For example, it is clear that the purpose of the eye is to see, and of the ears to hear. As he puts it:

Surely, just as each part of man - the eye, the hand, the foot, has a purpose, so also man as a whole must have a purpose. What is this purpose? Our biological functions we share in common even with plants. So these cannot be the purpose of man, since we are looking for something specific to man. The activities of our senses we also plainly share with other things: horses, cattle, and other animals. So there remain only the activities that belong to the rational part of man... The specific purpose or function of man must involve the activities of that part of his soul that belongs to reason. (Dorter 1982,51)

As a devoted biologist, botanist, moral philosopher, psychologist, zoologist and many more things besides Aristotle held a view about human nature that he interwove into his concept of virtue theory, this is described at some length in the text *Nicomachean Ethics*. From quite early on in the text Aristotle starts to interweave his views on human nature. He makes the claim that by nature man is blind to morality suggesting that man is naturally an amoral creature, this is backed up by the position earlier on where he says that man is born without knowledge hence morality cannot be part of human nature as man has yet to acquire knowledge of morality. Here Aristotle is not just making the suggestion that man is amoral but also that morality itself is *a posteriori* as opposed to being *a priori* knowledge. This suggestion is backed up again later by the phrase "None would be evil...wickedness is voluntary" (Aristotle, 1987, BKI, Chapter 7, no. 1094b). Aristotle was claiming that no one is born immoral, it is our choices that we make after birth that make us either moral or immoral.

St. Thomas, following the ideas of those philosophers before him assigned the name person to

individual beings with rational nature. He wrote:

So a special name is given among all other substances to individual beings having a rational nature, and this name is 'person'. Thus in this definition of person, the term 'individual substance' is used to refer to a singular being in the category of substance; 'rational nature' is added to mean the singular being among rational substances. (Gilson 1952, 29).

Of course, the human person is not just a metaphysical concept. On the contrary, the human person is the concrete, existing human individual. The human person denotes the presence of a living human individual. The British philosopher, Thomas Hobbes argued that human beings are fundamentally selfish and aggressive. Hobbes was a materialist who held that everything in "the universe, that is the whole mass of things that are, is corporeal, that is to say body. (Hobbes 1909, 524). Humans, too, are material bodies, and their activities can be explained much like those of a biological mechanism. In particular, human beings must be moved to act by the mechanism of desire, and so whatever human beings do, they are seeking satisfaction of their own mechanistic desires. In fact, Hobbes claimed, human beings are mainly motivated by the anti-social desire for power over others. In the first place he wrote "I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death".(Hobbes 1909, 86)

The view about human beings was most clearly expressed in the seventeenth century by the first philosophical figure of the modern European age. From one of his works Descartes leaves no question that human being is an immaterial self whose essential nature is its conscious ability to think:

...On the other hand, if I had only ceased from thinking, even if all the rest of what I had ever imagined had really existed, I should have no reason for thinking that I had existed. From that I knew that I was a substance (a thing) the whole essence or nature of which is to think and for its existence there is no need of any place, nor does it depend on any material thin; so that this "me" that is to say, the soul by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from body and even more easy to know than is the latter; and even if body were not, the soul would not cease to be what it is. (Gordin, 2002, 17).

Descartes is pointing out here that we can conceive of ourselves as existing without a body. He then makes a crucial assumption. If we can conceive of one thing without the other, then those two things are not the same. Because the self can be conceived of as not having a body, he claims, the self is not a body that is, it is not physical thing. On the other hand, I cannot think of myself without thinking. So thinking is necessary for the self; it is part of the essence (the defining characteristic that makes something what it is) of this self. All humans, then, are selves that are immaterial, that are essentially conscious and that can exist without the body. This can be called traditional western view of human nature because it has influenced western thinkers since ancient times. The traditional view holds that all humans have a self and that the essential nature of this self is to be a conscious or thinking immaterial entity. The Scottish philosopher, David Hume offered some strong reasons for rejecting the traditional assumption that human beings have a self. In his book *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume argues that all

real knowledge is based on what we can actually perceive with our senses- that we can see, hear, touch, smell, taste and feel. Because genuine knowledge depends on prior sense experience, assertions that are not based on sense experience cannot be genuine knowledge. He then points out that we never actually perceive the self. Consequently, there is no such thing as a self the notion of a self; it is a fiction made up by traditional philosophers. In his words, “there are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence...” He continues further that,

I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle of collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an in conceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.... The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance, pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. (Hume 1896, 6.)

Immediately following Hume is Immanuel Kant. Kant highlights the dual or animal/rational character of human nature. In his view, man has two competing natures: the animal side and the rational side. (Kant 1949, 37) This conception of human nature forms the base on which he builds his other theories. The animal nature is the side which people possess because they are living beings? It is the mechanical, impulse oriented side of human nature. It seeks the preservation of the self, reproduction, and community with other humans with the goal of maximizing personal pleasure and minimizing pain. In other words, the animal nature is based on sensuous impulses.

According to Rousseau, like other animals, human beings possess two principles, to which Rousseau refers to as self-preservation and pity. These two principles are anterior to reason. One need not look very hard at both humans and non-humans alike to see that they take great pain to maintain their lives. The second of this principle, pity Rousseau categorized as a “natural repugnance to the suffering of others”. This principle, though not unique to human beings, is key in understanding the core of many of what we call virtues in civil society. In addition to the principle of self-preservation and pity, Rousseau argues that human beings have two further faculties that distinguish him from all other animals, though they are in a sense dormant in the state of nature: freedom and perfectibility.

Rousseau's view on free-will by contemporary terms, probably best understood as libertarian. (Rousseau 1994 [originally published 1755], 83). Though human beings sometimes act on instinct, simply reacting to external stimuli, they can refuse these impulses or give into them. They can choose to do otherwise. Rousseau's basic position as is given in the second discourse is:

In every animal I see only an ingenious machine to which nature has given senses in order to revitalize itself and guarantee itself, to a certain point, from all that tends to destroy or upset it. I perceive precisely the same things in the human machine, with the difference that nature alone does everything in the operations of a beast, whereas man contributes to his operating by being a free agent. The former chooses or rejects by instinct and the later by an act of freedom... (Rousseau 1983, 184).

Hegel regarded human beings as rational beings. Reason was something that would self-actualize in the world. Freedom, the essence of reason, was to be realized along with the development of history. According to Hegel's theory, human beings and the world should have become rational beings with the establishment of the modern state (i.e. the national state). In reality, however, people have remained deprived of their human nature just as they always had, and the world has continued as irrational as it had been before.

According to Hegel Being is thought: here is exercised that insight which usually tends to deviate from the ordinary non conceptual way of speaking of the identity of thought and being. In virtue, further of the fact that subsistence on the part of what exists is self-identity or pure abstraction, it is the abstraction of itself from itself, in other words, is itself its own want of identity with itself and dissolution - its own proper inwardness and retraction into self - its process of becoming. (Hegel 2008,21ff)

In contemporary Western societies, it is quite widely assumed that there are no objective values for human living, only subjective individual choices. Liberal democracy is enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence, with its acknowledgment of the right of each “man” (i.e., *person*) to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness”—usually interpreted as the right of each individual to pursue his or her own *conception* of happiness. (Stevenson et al. 3) It should be noted, however, that those who believe there *are* objective moral standards (whether religious or secular) may still defend a liberal political system if they think it unjust or unwise to try to *enforce* those standards in law and social policy. So although value-subjectivism supports political liberalism, the reverse is not the case.

According to Christianity (along with Judaism and Islam), we are made in the image of God and our individual destinies in eternity depend on our relationships with God. Everyone is free to accept or reject God's purpose, and we will be judged according to how we exercise that freedom. Marxism denies any life after death and last judgment, holding instead that we are formed by the societies we are born and socialized into and that the nature of our lives and the progress we are able to make individually and socially depend on socioeconomic structure and change. There are different diagnoses of what is wrong with the human condition. Christianity says that our relationship with God is disrupted because we misuse our God-given freedom and are infected with sin. Marx also implied a similarly sweeping value judgment with his concept of “alienation,” which suggests that we fail to meet some ideal standard; his claim is that all human beings have potentials that *ought* to be fulfilled but will be only if capitalism is replaced by communism. There are very different prescriptions. Christianity holds that only the power of God himself can save us from our condition of sin, and the startling cosmic claim is that in the life and death of Jesus God has acted to redeem the whole world. It is painfully obvious that the world has not been perfected yet, but the Christian demand is that we each accept what God has done for us in Christ and work it out in our lives with his help. Human society will not be redeemed until individual lives are transformed by divine grace. Marxism says the opposite: that there can be no substantial improvement in individual lives until the economic system is transformed into communism. This

revolutionary change is said to be inevitable because of the laws of economic development, but individuals who realize the way history is moving can join the communist movement and help shorten the birth pangs of the new age. Each belief looks forward to a future fulfillment in which human beings and society will be redeemed, whether in life after death or in a future stage of history. ” Marx denied the existence of God and held that each person is a product of the particular economic stage of human society in which he or she lives.(Stevenson et al.4) “Man is condemned to be free,” said Jean-Paul Sartre, writing in occupied France during the Second World War. Sartre agreed with Marx's atheism but differed from him in holding that we are *not* determined by our society or by anything else; rather, every individual person is free to decide what he or she wants to be and do. In contrast, would-be scientific theorists of human nature such as E. O. Wilson and Richard Dawkins have treated humans as products of evolution, with biologically determined, species-specific desires and patterns of behavior.(Stevenson et al.4)

Marx's Concept of Human Nature

Marx accepts the formal structure of reality as deliberated in Hegelian Thought but rejects its unwarranted metaphysical content. For Hegel, reality is organic and subjects the dialectical processes of growth and development. The Hegelian dialectic is explained purely on metaphysical grounds. The creative activity of thought is simultaneously the creative activity of God's original creation, the activity of human thought which apprehends the inherent structure of thinking, thus bring God's thought to self-consciousness, since the structure of dialectical thought is apprehended not by senses but by reason. The key to the structure of reality is not sensory observation but the necessary movement of thought. According to Marx the world has an organic structure which can be delineated neatly in a dialectical theory. A dialectical theory views its subject matter through the stages of its concreteness and explains the systematic changes in this structure by the developmental tendencies inherent in it. The dialectical thinking thus mirrors the real world. (Wood and Marx 1981, 209).

Since the dialectical structure is all pervasive, it is reflected in the actuality of social existence. Society, for Marx is an organic whole of economic relations passing through definite stages of historical development and is driven by basic tendencies to change. The antagonism between classes arising out of the basic economic relations constitute the dynamics of the society. (Wood and Marx, 215)

Marx, unlike Hegel analyses the nature of social activity on an empirical plane. According to him, the unity of social consciousness is a historical and a social fact and not a metaphysical assumption. Thus Marx does not, like Hegel, confine himself to the study of purely spirit/mind/consciousness. But he, on the contrary, begins his enquiry by an investigation of the social condition under which consciousness is discovered. The Hegelian philosophy which Marx calls a speculative expression of Christian Germanic dogma (Sydney 1985, 17) views other forms of reality as a process of development of ideas in the realm of the logical and timeless order of necessity and does not delineate it as a succession of temporal structure. Marx's radical departure from Hegel's philosophy of identity lies in the domain of thought and things and extends to the field of logic and metaphysics. For Marx, all thought is human, not absolute. It transforms but does not create. Instead of treating self-consciousness of real man

living in a real objective world and conditioned by it, Hegel transforms man into an attribute of self-consciousness. He turns the world upside down. In place of human existence, Hegel puts Absolute Knowledge, which is concerned only with self-consciousness. Hence Absolute Knowledge is equated with self-consciousness which becomes the subject of humanity. (Sydney 1985,32) This Max says, is catching the chord by the wrong end for man is the subject, and self-consciousness predicates of man and not vice versa as in Hegel.

The concrete thought reflects the temporal succession of structures in the objective world. That is why the continuity of events which for Hegel is purely logical turns out to be socio-historical in the Marxian thought. The necessity of development is natural not logical. Thus the system which Marx analysed was a social system in motion and not Hegel's absolute system at rest. The logic of coordination in Hegel must be modified by logic of succession. (Sydney 1985,65) History does nothing. It is rather man, real living man, who acts, possesses and fights in everything. It is by no means history which uses man to carry out its ends; rather history is nothing but the activity of man in pursuit of his ends. Marx however, seeks a casual explanation of historical activity in concrete human needs and in conditions out of which these needs arise. Need, the practical expression of necessity brings human beings to consciousness, to class consciousness, to revolution. History then can be explained rationally, but is not made by reason. For Marx, human history is society history; society is class society, history thus becomes a record of class struggle, class struggle centres round property. (Sydney 1985,39) If all history is history of class struggle then how and why do these struggles occur? Here instead of making chance, will or unconsciousness responsible for movement in history, Marx offers an empirical principle of determination i.e. the development of modes of production. The Marxian theory of history thus assumes a different character, it is no more an extension of Hegelianism as Maraise observes "...all philosophic concepts of the Marxian theory are social and economic categories, whereas Hegel's economic and social categories are all philosophical concepts" (Marcuse 1956, 116).

Concluding Reflections

Marx distinguishes between 'human nature in general' and 'human nature as modified' with each historical period. In line with this distinction between a general human nature and the specific expression of human nature in each culture, Marx distinguishes, as we have already mentioned above, two types of human drives and appetites: the constant or fixed ones, such as hunger and the sexual urge, which are an integral part of human nature, and which can be changed only in their form and the direction they take in various cultures, and the 'relative' appetites, which are not an integral part of human nature but which "owe their origin to certain social structures and certain conditions of production and communication. (Marx 1958, 139) Marx gives as an example the needs produced by the capitalistic structure of society. "The need for money," he wrote in the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts, "is therefore the real need created by the modern economy, and the only need which it creates.... This is shown subjectively, partly in the fact that the expansion of production and of needs becomes an ingenious and always calculating subservience to inhuman, depraved, unnatural, and imaginary appetites." (Sayers Vol. 69, No. 4, October 2005, 610)

Man's potential, for Marx, is a given potential; man is, as it were, the human raw material which, as such, cannot be changed, just as the brain structure has remained the same since the dawn of history. Yet, man does change in the course of history; he develops himself; he transforms himself, he is the product of history; since he makes his history, he is his own product. History is the history of man's self-realization; it is nothing but the self-creation of man through the process of his work and his production: the whole of what is called world history is nothing but the creation of man by human labor, and the emergence of nature for man; he therefore has the evident and irrefutable proof of his self-creation, of his own origins. It is within this historical context that Marx discusses the humanization of nature.

Following this, we conclude this section with Sayers that, "According to Marx, as human beings we are not only creatures of need and desire. We are not purely passive consumers who would ideally like our needs to be met with, as Hume puts it, no laborious occupation required." Rather, we are active — productive and creative — beings. We get satisfaction from actively exercising our powers, from overcoming obstacles and being productive. In short, human beings are *producers* as well as consumers." (Marx 1958, 139)

This is the very essence of human nature according to Marx and it is this concept which forms the basis for his socialism. "To Marx reality is always human reality, not in the sense that man exists within nature but in the sense that man shapes nature" (Marx 1958,151) Marx's historical materialism is a distinctly dialectical theory of society and is permeated with humanism. It views social order as an organic whole of economic relations passing through definite stages of historical development and driven by basic tendencies as the antagonism between classes arising out of the basic economic relations which constitute the society. That is why Marx's materialism which he often terms naturalism is different from abstract materialism of natural science of 19th century. Marx's humanistic naturalism postulates that the ultimate possibility of human self-emancipation must be related to his philosophical premise about the initial creation of the world by man. Man relates himself to nature through activity and its labour which mediates between man and nature. Labour is the expression of human life and through labour, man's relationship to nature is changed. Hence, through labour man changes himself. Marx's theory of historical materialism may be summed up by saying that the social relations among human beings are determined not by their will but by the economic structure of the society which in turn is constituted by the various productive relations.

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