

What We Make of It

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Abstract

This paper analyses and attempts to come to an understanding of human nature, ultimately concluding with the assertion that humanity has no static, singular, and universal nature. Rather human nature should be understood as chiefly defined by the structure and organization of society and the incentives that it introduces. The form of human nature under the current system will also be analyzed and its implications evaluated to understand what it means for humanity as a species going into the future. The philosophical framework of Karl Marx features prominently for the purpose of analyzing societal structures and how they inform human nature and society.

Keywords: Human nature, Marxism, Social relations, Capitalism, Superstructure,

What We Make of It

“What is in us that turns a deaf ear to the cries of human suffering?” Thus asks the 2005 System of a Down song “Sad Statue.” It is a question well suited for its time, the preceding years had seen the beginning of the War on Terror and U.S invasions of Afghanistan and then Iraq. Those wars, especially in Iraq, were the catalyst for untold civilian suffering and death; a minimum of 134,000 civilians died from the consequences of the war in Iraq by 2013 and an estimated 28% of Iraqi children suffer from PTSD (Crawford, 2013.) Considering the anti-imperialist and U.S critical character of System of a Down as a band it is quite doubtful these facts were far from mind during the lyrical creation process. With that in mind new questions can arise from that same lyric: What could cause people to ignore such cruelty? How could Americans re-elect the leaders who started it? Said simply: What made the United States so barbarous?

The easiest way to answer those questions would likely be to place blame on the overzealous patriotism spurred by the attacks of September 11th, but such answers neglect the historical reality of such barbarism being a commonality in U.S foreign policy, such as in Korea or Vietnam. One could also attempt to make the general claim that the American general public is simply immoral and thus has no care for the deeds of their government, but such an assertion is quite devoid of nuance and makes a monolith of a greatly diverse country. By precluding the circumstances of the moment and some inherent evil in Americans, the next logical place to search for the root of their bellicose nature, and indeed of all human nature, is the structure of society.

In search of a view of human nature which places structure as the focal point few thinkers offer as much insight as Karl Marx. Exemplified in his 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the*

Critique of Political Economy in which he says “It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness” (Marx, 1859) This perspective offers an inversion of the typical conception of human nature by placing society as the antecedent to human nature, as opposed to the inverse. Thus, two main consequences arise out of this framework: Firstly, the idea of a static, universal, and monolithic human nature ceases to be possible as one’s nature is only to be understood in the context of their social relations. Secondly it gives us the ability to study human nature, not as universal truth, but dialectically as intertwined with the societal superstructure at a given socioeconomic moment. Out of this it becomes clear that human nature, as typically conceived as some sort of platonic abstraction, is not accurate. Instead, it is a consequence of a vast system of societal forces working in concert and tied to material reality, not innate. By studying the present organization of society, it can be shown that the structure it has taken is one that has imbued man’s nature with characteristics predisposing humanity to destroying itself. However, before we can detail how Marx’s systematic philosophy can be applied to understanding human nature and our fate as a species, we must first lay the groundwork for his thinking by tracing views of human nature across history.

The rest of this paper will be separated into three main sections. The first section will detail and critique the views of human nature developed over human history in various philosophical and religious tendencies. The second will highlight how the dialectical view of human nature expounded by Marx offers a better alternative. The third and final section will use the system of Marx to analyze our contemporary society and the nature it promotes in us to discover if it is one which will destroy us, and if it is, what is to be done.

Historic Philosophical and Religious Views on Human Nature

The western conception of human nature, like many philosophical issues, can be traced back to antiquity where it found its footing in Platonic and Aristotelian thought, in what The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy calls the “Traditional Package” (Roughley, 2023.) This traditional package is described as having 5 component variants: Firstly contrastive, which describes human nature as all the features and behaviors that can be separated out from the results of human actions and agency, like culture and socialization. The second, blueprint explanatory, paints human nature as the minimum characteristics and capacities necessarily for facilitating living functions. The explanatory teleological variant sees human nature as the form we are disposed to realize; the normatively teleological view expands upon this to say that it is not only the form humans are disposed to develop, but also ought to develop. The fifth and final part of the traditional package is the taxonomic outlook, which paints human nature as the characteristics which place humans into a shared biological grouping of *Homo sapiens* (Roughley, 2023.) With this established groundwork for understanding the topics actually being addressed when one invokes human nature we can look at and deconstruct arguments across western thought.

The Christian tradition’s view on human nature is one which presents man as inherently fallen, inclined toward, enslaved by, and born in sin, with good deeds and virtue being contrary to one’s nature and only being possible with the development of their relationship with God (Wallace, 2020.) This outlook seems to be answering to the explanatory teleological variant of human nature, positing that humanity’s natural disposition is toward sin, with good deeds being contrary to human nature. This view, while certainly having a bold and defined thesis, falls short of being actually useful. To assert that all humans are inherently sinful and only able to

overcome this with devotion to God seems to preclude non-believers from having a capacity for good, which simply does not match historical reality. It is also a perspective which holds little utility as tying goodness to an immaterial and unobservable God gives very little room for any actual analysis of contemporary society. These viewpoints are not representative of all who call themselves Christians, however the central critique; that theological outlooks lack observability in the way that views informed by materialist philosophical or scientific outlooks do; remains.

Detached from the western tradition the teachings of Confucius can offer another perspective on humanity; however, these views were not formulated by Confucius himself and rather a Confucian scholar who came after him, Mencius¹ or Mengzi (孟子.) In contrast to the Christian outlook Confucianism holds that human nature is good, but its definition of human nature is not congruent with any of the formulations of the western classical traditional package. In Confucianism nature is the characteristics of something that will develop in a healthy environment for that thing (Van Norden, 2019.) Beyond having a positive view of human nature this outlook is also distinct from that of the Christians in that it makes room for circumstance by noting the necessity of a proper environment for this good nature to emerge. However, this same fact is problematic in the sense that by connecting this nature on circumstance it loses its universality and therefore any identity as a sole human nature.

Back in the western tradition, the Enlightenment period saw western views on human nature see great maturation, with reason placed at the forefront of those emerging views. For instance, in John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* he says “If we will attentively consider new-born children, we shall have little reason to think that they bring many ideas into the world with them. For, bating perhaps some faint ideas of hunger, and thirst, and

¹ This is the latinized version of his name, as is Confucius for Kǒngfūzǐ (孔夫子)

warmth, and some pains, which they may have felt in the womb, there is not the least appearance of any settled ideas at all in them” (Locke, 1689.) Here Locke is completely rejecting the assertion of any innate ideas being natural to humanity and instead presenting one’s ideas at birth as complete blank slates, only to be developed through experience and interfacing with the world. Rousseau’s shares a tangential outlook on our nature saying in *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind* that “observing at how great a distance these people were from the first state of nature, that so many authors have hastily concluded that man is naturally cruel, and requires a regular system of police to be reclaimed; whereas nothing can be more gentle than he in his primitive state ” (Rousseau, 1755.) This view, whilst different in asserting that humanity is good or “gentle” in its “first state of nature,” also points to the same importance of the conditions of one’s existence as fundamental for how they actually present.

The Marxist View on Human Nature

The Marxist methodology of dialectical materialism offers a scientific basis for its inquiry. In “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” Marx’s longtime supporter and confidant Friedrich Engels supports the dialectical method as scientific with evolution. “Nature is the proof of dialectics [...] Nature works dialectically and not metaphysically; that she does not move in the eternal oneness of a perpetually recurring circle, but goes through a real historical evolution [...] [Darwin] dealt the metaphysical conception of Nature the heaviest blow by his proof that all organic beings, plants, animals, and man himself, are the products of a process of evolution going on through millions of years” (Engels, 1880.) By this Engels shows that nature and the

material world can and does operate dialectically. In Marx's 1845 "Theses on Feuerbach"² he claims, "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual [...] In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations" (Marx, 1888/1845.) In *The German Ideology* he illuminates this further with the example of language "Language is as old as consciousness, language is practical consciousness that exists also for other men, and for that reason alone it really exists for me personally as well; language, like consciousness, only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men. Where there exists a relationship, it exists for me: the animal does not enter into "relations" with anything, it does not enter into any relation at all. For the animal, its relation to others does not exist as a relation. Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all" (Marx, 1845.) Both these passages show Marx's rejection of any universal human nature and why there is little reason to assent to any view of it which lacks accounting for human social structures. By showing how language, something associated as inherent to humans and necessary for consciousness, is only possible through social processes it follows that the rest of our consciousness likely follows suit. Following this logic the best way to discover human "nature" is to analyze that which he called "the ensemble of the social relations."

By basing human nature on the social relations of society, it becomes decoupled from any sort of defining as a unitary abstraction. Instead, it becomes a reflection of the material world in which humans exist, in other words this definition is informed entirely by materialism as opposed to idealism. By having a materially informed understanding of human nature, analysis of it thus becomes achievable and even scientific. To begin to untangle an understanding of the

² A set of notes which set the framework for part of Marx's work *The German Ideology*, notes first published as an appendix to Engels' 1888 *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*, years after Marx's death.

totality of social relations one must first strive to understand upon what these social relations are built. Marx took to identifying this base of social relations as economic in nature, saying in his 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* that “In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life” (Marx, 1859.) What is seen here is Marx explaining how the economic organization of society, or mode of production, is the base from which the rest of the political, social, and intellectual superstructure arises. This gives the basic framework of the theory of base and superstructure. This is profound because of how well it reflects the reality shown throughout history. In medieval times the feudal economic system reigned, with nobility and clergy holding economic power, and its superstructure seemed molded to this very fact. The intellectual caste of medieval Europe was essentially synonymous with the clergy, social life was defined by blood and relations to the church, and the political structure saw authority derived from the papacy and later divine right. In modernity you need to look no further than the constitution of the average liberal democracy and the inevitable clause within proclaiming the sanctity of private property, showing the political structure supporting the supremacy of capital.

Beyond methods of analysis, the Marxist tradition also has much focus on change, how these systems of production upon which all other societal structures are based, rise and fall. Once again in Marx’s 1859 preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* he gives an

outline of this process “At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure” (Marx, 1859.) Essentially the mode of production of each epoch is inevitably overturned once its relations of production begin to hold back the productive forces and a new system must take the reins, as well as a new superstructure and a new human nature.

How Contemporary Capitalism Has Transformed Human Nature

Marx spent much of his literary career studying capitalism, and despite the fact global capitalism has continuously evolved over the last 200 years, its basic organization is the same thus his analysis still has merit. Karl Marx understood capitalism to be defined by the antagonism between the working class and the owning class, in Marxist vernacular, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. Under capitalism a relatively small bourgeois class owns the means of production, and the mass proletarian class works for them as wage-laborers (Marx & Engels, 1848.) This is the system from which, by the theory of base and superstructure, a societal superstructure arises which reflects the system used in production at every level. As Engels put it in “Socialism: Utopian and Scientific” “The materialist conception of history starts from the proposition that the production of the means to support human life and, next to production, the exchange of things produced, is the basis of all social structure” (Engels, 1880.) This scientific socialist view of wider society was shared by the *very* scientific socialist Albert Einstein. In his *Monthly Review* article “Why Socialism?” he describes how under the current societal setup the

average man is affected “his position in society is such that the egotistical drives of his make-up are constantly being accentuated” (Einstein, 1949.) This fits well into the ideological aspect of capitalist superstructure; the individualist and self-serving ideology it promotes serves to entrench the legitimacy of a structure which sees those who assent most to these impulses see the most success. Nobody becomes a billionaire through devotion to the common good and, quoting Marx in *The German Ideology* “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas”.

Einstein also describes another consequence of the capitalist system of our psyche saying, “Unknowingly prisoners of their own egotism, they feel insecure, lonely, and deprived of the naive, simple, and unsophisticated enjoyment of life” (Einstein, 1949.) This feeling of deprivation and loneliness was paralleled by Marx in his own theory of alienation. Marx’s theory holds that through the capitalist system people become alienated from their work, its products and eventually themselves as it ceases to be able to have meaning to them beyond being their means of subsistence (Marx, 1844.) Both of these descriptions point toward a common view that capitalism does not instigate joy in one’s labor, something plainly observable in the tired working masses of the world.

Since the ascendancy of neoliberalism across the capitalist world many of these same impulses incentivized by and consequences caused by the capitalist superstructure have intensified. Therapist Santiago Delboy of Fermata Psychotherapy describes this process “When competition constitutes the only way to organize our experience, define our purpose, and relate to other human beings, it becomes the basis for what Allan Scholom calls ‘the neoliberal colonization of our social reality and our psyches’” (Delboy, 2018.) This shows how under neoliberal capitalism the principle of competition goes beyond economics and underpins the

form of social structure as well, creating a society which incentivizes the highest degree of selfishness and alienates us from one another.

Conclusion

From this it is clear that capitalism has created in humanity a nature of selfishness and egoism, a nature representative of the ideology of a ruling class which necessarily lives by such ideas to maintain their power over the have-nots. Neoliberal capitalism brought this into even clearer focus, with the principle of competition infesting its way into every ideological aspect of the superstructure to socialize humans into seeing in each other nothing but a competitor. If this nature were permanent for us, there is no way humanity could last ever long into the future. The neoliberal era, however, is in decline and human nature is not static. The diminishing popularity of establishment politics across the entire west shows that this system is not our highest form. The “end of history” is ending, but capitalism is not.

The effects of capital’s primacy on our nature still predispose humanity to selfishness and greed, traits certain to be revealed vices for our long-term survival, thus falling into pessimism is easy. It is easy to say that capitalism's ascendancy will never end and even if it does it will happen too late and the degradation of our planet will have already consigned us to oblivion. It is easy to think that there is nothing that can replace capitalism, as proven by the collapse of the Soviet project. It is easy to be apathetic in a world that has taught you that this is the way things have to be. Philosopher Mark Fisher had it put best in his 2009 book *Capitalist Realism* “It is easier to imagine an end to the world than an end to capitalism.”

It is hard to hope. It is hard to fight for progress at the “end of history”. It is hard to strive for what is right in a world that is so wrong. It is hard to strive past the nature capitalism has imbued us with. Margaret Thatcher, the wicked witch of Neoliberalism said, “there is no

alternative” and she was right. There is no alternative to resisting and overcoming capitalism. It is known what this system stands for and the only way forward is to fight for something better, something that does not inspire us humankind that puts the interests of capital before the interests of its members. Humanity needs a system which will not see us inter ourselves on account for an endless drive for profit and expansion. Humanity needs a system that does not rely on the wanton extraction of the planet’s resources for limitless growth. Humanity needs a system that does not require the oppression and poverty of the masses to function. Capital serves no man, rabid and ravenous, it rips and tears away our humanity and planet, the bourgeois are merely its generals, gladly carrying out atrocities at the beckoning of the market’s invisible hand, only to discover that at the end that everyone dies, and all they did in life was condemn their fellow man to immiseration.

It is considered common sense that the Communist movement of the 20th century spurred by the Bolshevik October Revolution was a failure, and that it was. One cannot deny that the socialist states of the Soviet sphere ceased to be after 1991. But the dream of something better needs does not die on account of that fact. “In dark times, should the stars also go out?³” No, they mustn't. Just because the aspirations of yesterday’s people did not see their realization does not mean humanity should give up, knowing what the alternative is.

Capitalism has manufactured a human nature in which selfishness, greed, and cruelty are amplified. This amplification of these traits inherent to the superstructure which arises out of a capitalist system means that the humans with the most material wealth are also those who embody these evils⁴. If this system continues with these people humanity will be condemned to go extinct for their greed for capital. So, the people must fight back. All their lives the people of

³ This is a quote of dialogue from the 2017 Video Game *Disco Elysium*, developed by Estonian developer ZA/UM.

⁴ E.g Elon Musk

the world have been told there is no alternative to capitalism. All their lives the classrooms have told them stories about the horrors and failures of communism and the boons of liberalism. All their lives they have been told oppression is just a part of life. All their lives they have been fed the ideology of their ruling class. If humanity is to survive it will be because the people of the world reject this answer and choose instead to dictate, for the first time with their own voice, the kind of society that will face tomorrow's world.

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