

HUMAN NATURE FROM A LIFE-GROUNDED PERSPECTIVE

Jeff Noonan

Department of Philosophy, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada

Keywords: Human Nature, Life-Ground, Critical, Ideological, Essentialism, Enlightenment, Subjecthood

Contents

1. Introduction
 2. The Philosophical Development of a Life-Grounded Conception of Human Nature
 3. The Deconstruction of Essentialist Concepts of Human Nature
 4. Human Nature from a Life-Grounded Perspective
- Glossary
Bibliography
Biographical Sketch

Summary

The chapter examines the contradictions that have driven the development of concepts of human nature in Western philosophy. It maintains that a critical conception of human nature is indispensable for understanding the structure of oppression that impedes the full development of human capabilities for definite groups of humans. From a critical perspective human nature is not some defined set of predicates or behaviors (two legs, self-interest, etc), but a range of capabilities which, given just social conditions, human beings can develop according to their own interest and talents. The critical conception exposes ideological uses of human nature which are designed to legitimate particular forms of society and the types of social privilege that typify them. Postmodern criticisms of human nature are misguided in so far as they conflate ideological and critical uses. The chapter concludes with a life-grounded explanation of human nature as defined by a set of vital capabilities maximally open to individuated expression.

1. Introduction

According to the 2002 *United Nations Human Development Report*, 2.8 billion human beings live on less than two dollars a day, with 1.2 billion **barely surviving at the margins of subsistence on less than one dollar a day**. While the coexistence of absolute poverty and immense wealth might seem obviously unjust, it is the duty of philosophy to account for and ground feelings of injustice in reasoned understanding. The beginning of reasoned understanding is systematic questioning of the terms in which the problem is cast. Wherein does the injustice lie? In the fact that the poorest have only one or two dollars a day on which to live? Or in the fact that they cannot live on one or two dollars a day? If the answer is the latter, then what exactly does one mean by “to live.” ? Does to “live” mean “maintain basic biological functions” in common with non-human animals? Or does it mean to develop the capacities for self-creation that constitute truly human life?

The answer is that the unjust consists in the deprivation of the resources that people need prevents them from developing those capacities that make life worth living *ashuman*. If we identify human life with mere biological functioning- eating, respiring, reproducing, in common with non-human animals (however basic these are in importance), then we cannot say that the absolutely poor are done an injustice if they can still (barely) eat, respire, and reproduce as dogs do. The injustice is that their life is *reduced to* these merely animal biological functions when we they are capable of being human.

Yet, if one argues this as **philosophers from Aristotle to Marx to Martha Nussbaum do** one presupposes that humans share some *nature in common* across their differences of culture, ethnicity, gender, geographical location, age, and socio-economic status. If there is no such thing as a human nature that unites human beings as human whatever their diversities, (and many have mistakenly rejected this concept as incompatible with differences amongst human beings), then it would not be possible to say that the absolutely poor foreign countries, are really suffering gross injustice. For on what basis would we think that people who are separate from us in place, circumstances, and culture, really are capable of more than their socio-economic conditions determine if there is no common ground of human status on which to base this counter-factual claim? The possibility of a global concern for the state of the absolutely poor depends upon their being some universal human nature on the basis of which we can construct a valid and realizable theory of human justice. This essay will defend such a concept of human nature and define the general outlines of a life-grounded theory of human justice on this basis.

The argument will be developed in three parts. The first will draw on the history of philosophy as the source of the form and content of a universal conception of human nature. The second, will examine the important postmodern criticism of universal conceptions of human nature. The third will explicate a life-grounded conception of human nature that comprehends the postmodern criticism but proves that its concern with respecting differences presupposes a universal understanding of human nature.

The argument can be summarized as follows. The history of philosophical reflection on the nature of human being is contradictory in so far as it confuses critical and ideological conceptions. The critical conception of human nature understands humanity as irreducible to the predicates (specific identities) that define it at a given time. Ideological conceptions, on the other hand, reduce human being to some one set of predicates (particular identity) that characterize some segment of it at a given moment. These two conceptions have contradictory implications. The critical element, the capacity to change given social structures, is the foundation for criticizing given states of affairs as unjust. Ideological conceptions, on the other hand, are always strategies of justifying injustice. Postmodern critique of all concepts of human nature as nothing but the ruses of social power seeking to legitimate itself overlooks this crucial distinction. Because it fails to note this essential distinction it falls victim to the contradiction that it cannot ground its own concern for the well-being of the oppressed whose interests it purports to champion. The life-grounded conception of human nature understands the dynamic elements of human nature as organic capacities of the human being for

individuation and interprets well-being as the social conditions in which those capacities can be developed to their widest possible scope.

2. The Philosophical Development of a Life-Grounded Conception of Human Nature

2.1. The Classical Age: Plato and Aristotle

The first systematic theories of human nature in Western philosophical history developed in the work of Plato and Aristotle. What was distinctive about their work was that they both inferred their conception of a good human life from an overarching idea of a universal good. In general terms, the idea of the good transcended fallible human opinions and was supposed to provide an objective model of genuine meaning and purpose which could serve as a model for individual lives. As the argument will demonstrate below, the classical conception of human nature establishes a principle of fundamental importance for all social philosophy interested in establishing objective grounds for the critique of inhuman conditions. That principle is that the idea of the good life is not a matter of arbitrary opinion but must be anchored in a proper understanding of human nature. However, as will become clear, the classical conception of human nature is contradictory. On the one hand, it provides the *critical* basis for exposing social impediments to the full development of human capacities. On the other hand, however, it also contains *ideological* elements whose function is to justify the very same impediments to full self-realization exposed as unjust by the critical side of the idea of human nature. As will be demonstrated, this dialectic between critical and ideological elements runs through the historical development of traditional metaphysical conceptions of human nature. The argument will begin with the work of Plato.

Plato's ontology (theory of being) understands truth and reality as hierarchical. The more permanent a being is, the more real it is. The more real a being is, the more knowable it is. The material world that we experience with our senses does not share in the highest degree of reality because the particular things that constitute it must all decay and disappear. Thus at the apex of reality Plato posits unchanging universal Ideas or Forms. These Forms are the eternal models of different classes of material things. The universe as a whole is normatively structured by the Form of the Good, which Plato defines in *The Republic* as "the cause for all things of all that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light ... and ... in the intelligible realm [is] the authentic source of truth and reason."

Reality is thus not simply an external presence which humans confront as a limit or barrier. On the contrary, in its essential truth reality is meaningful and purposive, i.e., good, and human life gains its proper wealth only from a philosophical understanding of what is eternally true and good by nature. The main task for human beings, then, is to understand themselves, their own nature, in relation to this universal goodness.

When one examines Plato's account of human nature one discovers the first instance of the contradiction between critical and ideological conceptions. On the one hand, in pursuing the origin of human society Plato develops a conception of human nature that emphasizes its capacity for learning and identifies as the good for human beings forms

of life that are individually meaningful because they promote the health of one's community. Education is the essential mediation between latent capacities and an actual good life. To educate the soul in this conception of human nature is to cause it to grow towards the universal truth and generate consciousness of the intrinsic link between individual and social well-being. On the other hand, in constructing his ideal model of social relations Plato emphasizes the existence of a natural hierarchy dividing human beings into functional classes that contradicts the earlier formulation. This conception ignores the earlier position that all souls have the capacity for educative growth and freedom and instead dogmatically identifies individual potential with the class into which one is born. Each moment of the contradiction will be developed in turn.

Early on in the *Republic* the dialogue between Glaucon and Socrates focuses on the question of whether cities (human society) are natural or conventional. In rejecting Glaucon's proto-contractualist account of social origins Socrates presents what looks like a life-grounded understanding of human society. That is, he maintains that human beings are naturally social creatures because the satisfaction of needs required to maintain life can only be accomplished through cooperative labor. Thus the first element of human nature that Plato highlights is our needs. Plato thus conceives of a healthy city as one in which each citizen has a productive (need-satisfying) task to fulfill. He initially identifies a healthy (good) life with one in which the individual citizen finds his or her satisfaction in successfully completing a socially necessary job.

Throughout his account of human nature Plato emphasizes the role of education in promoting the character traits that are required if citizens are to be free and self-governing. Initially, he stresses the plasticity of human nature in childhood, arguing that "the beginning of every task is the chief thing, especially for a creature that is young ... for it is then that it is best molded and takes the impression that one wishes to stamp on it." While the idea of 'stamping' a character on young people has authoritarian overtones, it also implies that no one is born with fixed natural limitations but all have the potential to succeed at any type of work provided that they are properly cared for and nurtured.

In this dimension of his theory Plato stresses that people are capable of living freely if they are well-educated. It is only when the education system is corrupt that citizens require external authority to control them. "Will you find surer proof of an evil and shameful education," he asks Glaucon, "than the need for first rate physicians and judges?" The proliferation of doctors and judges is a sign that citizens cannot govern their appetites. Here he does not attribute lack of self-government to the natural inferiority of the multitude but rather to deficiencies in education. Plato's chief example of how to live well at this point is not the philosopher but the committed workman who derives meaning and pleasure from satisfying the demands of his job. When people feel confirmed in their social importance they willingly take on the burdens of self-governance and reject life as worthless when they can no longer contribute to the health of the whole. Thus he asserts that "a carpenter ... when he is sick expects his physician to give him a drug ... if anyone prescribes for him a long course of treatment ... he hastily says ... that such a life of preoccupation with his illness and neglect of his work ... isn't worth living." In summation, the critical moment of Plato's theory of human nature emphasizes its neediness, its capacity for learning and self-government, and the

essential link between socially meaningful work and individually meaningful life. It thus establishes standards for the evaluation of social formations. Where individuals are slothful or immoderate the fault lies not in the ‘nature’ of the individuals but in the social institutions in which they have been educated. This conception of human nature is critical in so far as it implies that everyone is capable of educated to growth towards the universally good and consciously realizing it the contributions that they make to social well-being. Social problems are not caused by individual ‘natural’ flaws but poorly organized social institutions.

This critical conception is contradicted, however, by the account of human nature that Plato articulates when the dialogue turns to the structure of an ideal city. The theory of human nature developed early in the dialogue pertains to a state in which luxury production has not overstimulated the appetites. The early healthy city is supplanted by a sick or ‘feverish’ city in which people are diverted from their proper tasks by irrational desires for luxury production goods. In order to cure this disease more authoritarian forms of governance are needed. It is in the inquiry into the best form of governance that Plato, seemingly without realizing it, allows an ideological moment to enter into his conception of human nature.

The critical moment of the theory of human nature implied that every socially necessary occupation is valuable, both to the individual and the society, and that all people are potentially capable of self-government. When the need for a specific class of governors is at issue, however, Plato reconsiders the value of different human capacities and the ‘natures’ of the people that engage in different occupations. Rather than stressing the potential of everyone to be self-governing, Plato contends that unless a class of philosophers is put in charge of the city, humanity will have no rest from evil. Philosophy is not simply one important occupation amongst others but is posited as the highest pursuit of human being, not open to all on the basis of equal initial potential but the preserve of a higher type of human being, “the best man who has within him the divine governing principle.” The non-philosophical citizens must become slaves to the class that governs both itself and the state. “Then is it not in order that such a one may have a like government with the best man,” he writes, “that we say he ought to be a slave to the best man who has within himself a divine ruling principle?” This moment of the theory of human nature ignores the earlier emphasis on the capacity for change and equal initial potential in favor of an ideological principle that emphasizes a natural hierarchy in the distribution of potentials and the innate superiority of the philosopher.

The ideological moment, like the critical, also functions as a principle according to which society and individual life may be judged, but its implications are the opposite. The ideological moment, while critical of Athenian democracy, presupposes rather than criticizes the normative hierarchies central to Greek society, especially the belief that those who were in fact slaves were slaves ‘by nature.’ The ideological moment of the theory of human nature naturalizes rather than criticizes social hierarchies by arguing that people are naturally sorted into types distinguished from each other by fixed differences in the quality of potential for achievement. Its effect is to bar the way to social change governed by the value of expanding the scope of capacity realization for everyone. Charitably interpreted, the critical moment, by contrast, implies that what individuals are able to achieve is a function not of naturally differentiated potential but

the experiences that they have while young. Equal education, according to the critical moment, satisfies the material condition for equal achievement. The critical moment understands human beings according to their equal potential to *develop into* different ways of living. The ideological moment *reduces* human beings to the specific occupation that they find themselves performing. In the latter case what one does is read as a sign of what one is naturally capable of doing. In the former, what one does is understood as what one has been educated to do. The later conception holds out the hope that changed social institutions can expand the life-horizons of those citizens whose life-activity is unsatisfying. The former conception tries to ensure stasis by convincing citizens that what they find themselves doing is what they are naturally fit to do. While Aristotle represents an epochal development of a critical understanding of human nature, he too ultimately falls victim to the contradiction that besets Plato's theory.

Aristotle makes explicit the normative importance of the critical conception of human nature. It is Aristotle who first systematically links the idea of the good life to the realization of human nature. Aristotle defines human nature as a set of characteristic inner capacities or potentials and links the idea of the good life to the conditions in which those capacities can be realized to their fullest extent. As in Plato, his theory of human nature and its inner contradiction follow from his metaphysics and especially his conception of the divine as a fully self-realized being.

Like Plato, Aristotle understands Being as a hierarchy of reality and truth. Aristotle detaches this hierarchy from the Platonic opposition of transcendent Forms and material copies and instead conceives it as an immanent relation between two principles, one active and the other passive. Being as such is organized by a divine principle of pure actuality or full realization of all capacities at every moment. This life is the life of the divine and it serves as the model for the best possible human life. As he writes in his *Metaphysics*, "it is a life such as the best one which we enjoy, and enjoy for a short time (for it is ever in this state, which we cannot be, since its actuality is pleasure." This 'state' is pure self-realization in every moment of existence. God does not realize its potentiality over time, it holds nothing in reserve. Every moment of its existence expresses its essential nature. Human beings emulate God as far as they are able by striving to know and express the highest potentialities of their nature.

Understood physically, the striving to realize essential capacities in existence is the action of an immaterial, active form present in passive matter. The nature of any given living being is encoded in its form and expressed in its material structure and characteristic range of potentialities. The life history of different living things is governed by the goal (telos) of realizing its essential nature. As he argues in his *Physics*, "the nature is the end or the 'that for the sake of which.' For if a thing undergoes a continuous change and there is a stage which is last, this stage is the end." Thus the physical changes that characterize the development of a living thing are meaningful. They either express directly (as in plants and animals), or indirectly, (as in humans, as the development of the material conditions for) the realization of their proper good. In both cases the life of those living beings is governed by the goal of realizing to the fullest the immanent potentials encoded in their form.

The form of living things, according to Aristotle, is their soul. The soul both animates matter and encodes the defining potentialities that distinguish one species from another. As he defines it in *On the Soul*, the soul is “the first grade actuality of a natural body having life potentially in it.” ‘First grade actuality’ means the unrealized capacities characteristic of living things. The soul of a human, for example, contains the first grade actuality of rational thought. A healthy and mature individual human will realize that first grade actuality by learning how to think. A good life for any living being will thus take the form of realizing in existence the full range of the ‘first grade actualities’ its nature (soul) encodes.

It is this teleological movement from potentiality to actuality that is the basis of Aristotle’s critical conception of human nature. The best life for a human being is a life of maximum activity, a life in which all the potentialities in the human soul are cultivated and developed as fully as possible. Thus a life in which the development of the rational capacity is paramount would be the best life for a human being. However, Aristotle does not argue that the philosophical life alone is of value. While judging it best because it most closely emulates the divine life, Aristotle is clear in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that lives that fall below this divine standard still have value to the extent that they realize genuinely human capacities and produce happiness for those who live them. Happiness is not found only in contemplating the eternal principles of Being, but rather is “activity in accordance with virtue.” Thus there is goodness in all lives that are led in pursuit of the development of truly human capabilities.

This critical understanding of human nature as self-realization has clear implications for the form of society. A society in which certain groups are prevented from realizing those potentials is a society that harms them by making it impossible for such people to live a fully realized, and therefore good, life. As in Plato, Aristotle stresses the duty of the educational system to cultivate in the young habits that will enable them to choose activities that are productive of real happiness. Viewed from the standpoint of the potentialities encoded in the soul, Aristotle’s conception of human nature thus prioritizes meeting the needs of the young so that once they have become citizens they will be able to govern their lives in accordance with those capacities which are best. The goal of social organization, judged from this dynamic conception of human nature, is the all-round development of the self-creative capacities of the citizens.

When, however, the focus shifts from the abstract account of human potentiality to the actual structure of citizenship in Aristotle’s political theory, we see the emergence of an ideological moment in the conception of human nature that contradicts the political implications of the critical moment. When it comes to determining the extension of the category of citizenship Aristotle retreats from the critical implications of his understanding of the best human life. In line with the culturally predominant belief system of his day, Aristotle not only approves of slavery and the exclusion of women from citizenship, he employs his metaphysics to justify both forms of oppression. In so doing he converts a historically contingent social prejudice into a metaphysical necessity. As he argues in his *Politics* “it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body ... is natural and expedient ... the same holds good of animals in relation to man ... [and, in relation to male and female] the male is by nature superior and the female inferior ... this same principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind ... the lower sort are by nature

slaves.” The contradiction here takes the same form as in Plato. According to the critical moment, human nature is able to develop those capabilities for which its education has prepared it. In other words, social institutions are responsible for the development of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ forms of life. When it comes to women and slaves, however, nature itself is now posited as the cause of their inferiority. The contradiction is even sharper in Aristotle, however, because his theory of human nature is much more sophisticated than Plato’s.

As was shown above, Aristotle argues that the soul determines the nature of species. The form of a good life for individuals of that species is to realize the general capacities that define that form of life. If that is the case, then all members of the human species must share in the general capacities of humanity. Aristotle’s ideological understanding of the inferior nature of women and slaves commits him to the absurdity that women and slaves must be members of a different species since, according to his political theory, they are by nature incapable of rational self-government.

This absurdity should not lead one to reject Aristotle’s account of human nature *tout court*. Indeed, it is only because of the power of the critical moment of his conception that it is possible to expose the absurdity of its ideological element. In other words, without the normative grounds supplied by his idea of the good life *for human beings* as all-round self-determination there would be no basis to convict him of denying the humanity of women and slaves. To the extent that philosophy progressively understands the full range of political and social implications of the dynamic concept of human nature it operates with a concept that is necessary to the critique of social hierarchies and oppressive systems. The problem lies in static conceptions of human nature that naturalize social hierarchies. Without the dynamic conception, however, that false naturalization cannot be detected, much less understood, criticized, and transformed. Thus, we must pursue our investigation of the history of philosophical conceptions further, taking as our new focus the radical turn given the concept of human nature by the Renaissance thinker Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

2.2. The Renaissance: Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola

The concept of human nature that emerges from the classical age is contradictory. On the one hand the foundations of a systematic and consistent critical conception are present, but their emancipatory potential is compromised by ingrained beliefs about the natural basis of social hierarchies. The resolution of this contradiction depends upon overcoming the identification of the given social position of different groups with fixed differences in their nature. A significant step towards resolving this contradiction is taken in the work of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola.

Mirandola was a neo-Platonist. More interesting from the perspective at work here, however, was his cosmopolitanism. He did not champion neo-Platonism *against* other metaphysical systems but instead sought out the conceptual points of unity between different systems of belief. His commitment was to the truth and he considered that all systems of metaphysics and their religious articulations ultimately expressed the same idea with different content. He aimed to defend his conclusions in a planned 1477 public explanation of his *900 Theses*. Before he could do so, however, Pope Innocent VIII

seized his text and had a number of the theses branded heretical. The text which concerns me here, his *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, was written as the introduction to the *Theses*.

His account of human nature moves away from the Greek tendency to identify a fully realized human nature with a particular occupation or life-practice. Instead, he draws attention to the *process by which* a given life path is adopted as the key criterion distinguishing fully human from inferior forms of life-activity. That is, rather than identify self-activity with some particular life-practice (say, philosophy) Mirandola was more interested in the way in which a life was chosen. Human beings are distinct by nature from other species not because they can practice philosophy, but because they are capable of deciding for themselves which of the capacities encoded in the human soul they will cultivate over a life time. It is self-determination, not the particular determinations which make up the content of a life, that is the distinguishing feature of human nature.

In Mirandola's theory the nature of humanity cannot be identified with any particular predicate (reason, self-interest, neediness, etc). Unlike other species humanity, according to Mirandola, does not have a fixed nature at all. Instead, the distinguishing characteristic of human beings is that they alone are capable of determining and transforming their apparent nature. Our differences, therefore, are all the product of an underlying self-creative humanity. Whereas other species are distinguished from each other by fixed differences, human beings are such that they are the creators of all the predicates that pertain to them. Thus, one cannot define humanity according to a nature that is fixed once and for all, since human beings *define themselves differently*. In short, it is not some one type of activity or one distinguishing capacity that makes beings human, but rather the freedom of human activity from external determination. Mirandola imagines the gods addressing the first human as follows: "Neither a fixed abode nor a form that is thine alone, nor any function that is peculiar to thyself have we given thee, Adam, to the end that according to thy longing and according to thy judgment thou mayest have and possess what abode, what form, and what functions thou thyself shalt desire." The philosophical point that Mirandola is making is profound. Whereas the nature of other animals functions as an external limitation upon their life-activity, determining it once and for all, the nature of human being is an internal condition of their ultimate freedom *from* any one form of life. The difference between a human and an inhuman existence is thus not explained by one type of occupation rather than another, but by whether people are in a position to choose what sorts of occupations they will pursue. In other words, a truly human life is one in which people are free in deciding how they will live. Human nature is impeded, therefore, by social conditions which prevent people from reflecting upon and deciding which of all the immanent potentials of a human life they will try to realize. Although Mirandola is not in a position to extend his reasoning, it clearly follows from his conception of human nature as essentially "self-transforming" that the sorts of social hierarchies that Plato and Aristotle both naturalize are the primary impediments to a fully human life. In other words, once the critical conception of human nature becomes clearly linked to the idea of self-determination the function of ideological conceptions (to provide philosophical support for oppressive social hierarchies) becomes clear.

The deep principle implied by Pico's critical conception of human nature is that there are many contents that are compatible with the form of a truly human life. What makes different practices of living human is that they are functions of conscious decision and not socially imposed limitations. When human nature is understood as the capacity to determine which differences will be developed it becomes possible to look back over history and understand struggles against socially imposed limitations universally as one and all struggles to free human nature (self-determination) from ideological conceptions whose primary purpose is to keep the oppressed in 'their natural place. Marcuse, defending a conception of human nature that derives from the development traced here, thus looks to the history of struggle against oppression as the evidence in favor of the critical conception. He argues that "the truth of this model of human essence is preserved better in the history of human misery and suffering and struggles to overcome them." What he means is that the reality of self-determination is proven by the fact that oppressed and exploited groups— women, slaves, workers, excluded minorities— do not accept the socially imposed limitations on their life-horizons. If they were not free in essence or by nature there would be no accounting for their struggles. The point is that if freedom as self-determination were not a real element of human nature repressed by given social conditions there would be no possibility of any oppressed group becoming conscious of its oppression. To be oppressed means precisely to be 'weighed down upon' by social conditions that prevent the oppressed group from developing their potentials according to their own ideas. If oppressed groups never experienced themselves as oppressed, it is clear that they would never fight against given social conditions. But they have and they do. Every concrete victory of an oppressed group is thus evidence in favor of the critical conception of human nature and a defeat for ideological conceptions. Once women, for example, have proven themselves capable of higher education, sexist arguments to the effect that women are essentially irrational become impossible to rationally maintain. Such an argument is objectively exposed as ideological.

Mirandola of course is not conscious of these emancipatory implications. He does not develop his theory as a critique of social hierarchies nor does he look to history to supply content for the general form of truly human activity. Indeed, it is not until the Enlightenment that metaphysical reflection on the specific difference that defines humanity is united with an historical inquiry into the political development of human being. Once history and philosophy are united in a critical investigation of the conditions for the free development of human capacities the concept of human nature ceases to be simply a posit of philosophical argument and becomes the conscious foundation of struggles against conditions that oppress human self-determination. Thus, we now turn to the work of Condorcet. It is here that the first steps are taken to coherently synthesis philosophical theories of human nature with a concrete historical examination of the development of human powers.

2.3. Radical Enlightenment: Condorcet

While the Greeks defined human beings as essentially rational, their interpretation of the implications of this claim excluded women and slaves from a full share in the defining nature of human being. The new value assigned to individuality in the Renaissance, coupled with the growth of natural science in the seventeenth century,

began to erode the social and the metaphysical hierarchies that defined the ancient and medieval world. If nature were just a dynamic material system and not a purposive model of hierarchy, if different expressions of capacities could be understood as concrete modes of being human, then the way was cleared for a new egalitarian conception of human nature and social organization. In the evolving egalitarian ideal human reason was not differentially distributed but equally distributed. One of the earliest expressions of this evolving ideal was character Descartes' seminal *Discourse on Method*. It begins with the assertion that "the power of judging aright and of distinguishing truth from error, which is properly called good sense or reason, is by nature equal in all men." While it is certain that Descartes intends by 'men' only males, and conceives of rationality in such a way as to prejudicially subordinate our embodied being to our rational mind, his egalitarian principle, viewed in its historical results and not its abstract limitations, shook traditional appeals to nature as the justification of social hierarchy.

Descartes, himself does not develop these historic implications. Yet, his abstract egalitarianism would inform the most important political movement of the modern era, the Enlightenment, and its political culmination, the French Revolution. The revolution was justified by its most philosophically self-conscious actors on the basis of the principle that it created the social conditions for the flourishing of the natural equality of human beings. The most important philosophical reflection on the meaning of the revolution for our purposes is the work of Condorcet.

Condorcet's work, *Esquisse d'une tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humaine*, is essential because he is the first to systematically distinguish between the general capacities that distinguish human being as a species from the different concrete developments these capacities attain in given historical worlds. It thus becomes possible to understand different modes of human life as different levels of development of the same capacities. In Greece, different meant inferior and inferior meant less than human. With Condorcet, however, it becomes possible to understand concretely how different modes of social organization either impede or promote the full development of self-determining human nature. His historical approach enables philosophy to precisely focus on the institutional structure as the primary cause of the lack of capacity development in different societies. Thus it became possible to argue that women, for example, failed to govern themselves rationally not because they were naturally inferior, but because the institutions of a sexist society prevented them from so doing. Realizing the full potential of human nature thus takes on the character of a political project which aims at institutional change. The French Revolution was historical proof that progress is real and the reality of progress proves that "nature has set no limits to our hopes."

The key to understanding Condorcet's importance is the distinction that he draws between metaphysical and historical aspects of human nature. Metaphysical aspects he defines as 'the general facts and the constant laws that present the development of these faculties which are shared by different individuals of the human race.' Metaphysics thus generalizes a concept of human nature by observing those elements that are constant across time and space. However, metaphysical generalization is only the first step in understanding human nature. For a full knowledge of human being the philosopher must look for patterns of historical development of these capacities, both in order to see how

they grow and, perhaps more importantly, to see what forces inhibit or encourage their growth. Condorcet believes that historical investigation discloses a progressive development of human capacities in human history. His account of that development he thus presents in a “picture of the progress of the human spirit.”

Cogent objections can certainly be leveled at Condorcet’s belief that this progress is governed by immutable causal laws. As Bonner correctly argues, however, the core of his position is “fundamentally liberating” and does not depend upon the veracity of his concept of historical law. The key sign of progress is the triumph of reason over prejudice. This interpretation of progress is not logically dependent on a mechanical and naive conception of historical law. Indeed, if progress against prejudices is contingent upon the struggles of oppressed groups then it is all the more humanly valuable. Thus, for Condorcet, the most important object of philosophical-historical inquiry is the struggle between reason, which teaches us that human beings have equal capability, and prejudice, which argues that human nature is sorted into inferior and superior types. Understanding progress thus demands that we understand the history of struggle against them. As he says of his text, “the history of these struggles, those of the birth, triumph, and overthrow of prejudices will therefore occupy a central place in this work.” The veracity of the metaphysical concept of human nature is thus subject to historical confirmation. If prejudices are in fact overcome in history through the struggles of the purportedly inferior then they prove by their own activity, and not by metaphysical conceit, their equal capability.

The final important element of Condorcet’s understanding of the dynamic concept of human nature is the way in which it functions as a principle of solidarity. United by their understanding of the common capacity of human beings for rational self-government, philosophers and political activists situated in different cultural contexts, joined together in practical struggles to change the hierarchical institutions by demolishing the prejudices that support them. The interest of philosophy is not in the abstract contemplation of eternal truths about human nature but rather is the practical liberation of human self-determining capacity from those institutions which oppress it. As he argues, “the philosophers of different nations embrace, in their meditations, the interests of the whole of humanity without distinction of country, race, or sect.” Note that he says ‘embrace’ and not ‘define.’ An interest in freedom and equality is given by the rational nature of human beings. Philosophers *understand* this truth, they do not invent it. Unlike Plato, Condorcet does not maintain the philosophers have exclusive and expert knowledge of the one right way to live. Rather, their metaphysical knowledge is realized in struggle against “all forms of tyranny.” The aim is to make a clearing for self-activity, not to demand that everyone else become their ‘slaves.’ Tyrannical systems are those that deny the humanity of others by appeal to some specific difference (racial, sexual, etc.) Philosophy contributes to emancipation not by telling those others how to live, but by refuting the prejudices impeding different groups from governing themselves. This point is clear in his condemnation of slavery. His condemnation is as powerful a critique as one will find in any system of Western philosophy. He thus says of those philosophers who condemned this most inhuman of practices that “they have stood up in Europe against these crimes with which greed has stained the shores of America, Africa, and Asia. The philosophers of England and France are honored to take the name of these Blacks (Noirs) whom the stupid tyrants

have refused to count amongst the race of humans (hommes).” Note that Condorcet does not say that European philosophers told the black slaves how to be human. Rather he says that they were honored to identify (take the name of) with their struggles against the stupid tyrants. And note also what made the tyrants stupid. They did not understand the proper extension of the concept of humanity in so far as they did not ‘count’ the slaves amongst the race of human beings.

Thus Condorcet explicitly links the dynamic concept of human nature to general forms of institutional change the aim of which is to establish the conditions for the further development of human capacities. The life-grounded character of the dynamic concept of human nature begins to come into clear focus. Condorcet gives political content to the general Aristotelian idea that the good life is the life in which our defining capacities can flourish. Social hierarchies supported by static conceptions of human nature (prejudices) are always impediments to human flourishing. As important as Condorcet’s historicization and politicization of the dynamic concept of human nature are, however, it remains limited in its practical efficacy because of its overly general understanding of human capacities and the impediments to them. A struggle between reason and prejudice is certainly a valid description of the political history of struggles for freedom, but lacks specificity both as regards the range of human capacities and the institutional structures that impede their development. Thus we must move to the richer accounts of the meaning of human capacities and the structures and systems that impede their growth that we find in Hegel and Marx.

2.4. Revolutionary Modernity: Hegel and Marx

While Hegel does not situate his work relative to Condorcet’s attempt to provide an historical account of the progress of the ‘human spirit’ his *Phenomenology* may be interpreted as a dialectical account of what Condorcet treats more mechanically. A detailed discussion of the difference between dialectical and mechanical methods of philosophizing is not possible here. Instead the emerging differences will be seen through a limited presentation of Hegel’s understanding of human nature.

Hegel’s metaphysics understands Being as reason, and reason as “purposive activity.” That the universe is purposive is proven by the existence of a species, humanity, that is self-consciously rational. That is, human beings are not determined by their environment or their animal instincts, but are, collectively, self-determining. Hegel signifies this essential difference between human nature and the natural world in his concept of Spirit. Hegel understands historical development as the human species gradually developing its understanding of its spiritual nature. As he writes, “A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much ‘I’ as ‘object’. With this, we already have before us the Notion of *Spirit*. What still lies ahead ... is the experience of what Spirit is ... the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: ‘I’ that is ‘We’ and ‘We’ that is ‘I’. In other words, human nature is essentially social and self-determining. In undeveloped states of human society people think that their nature is determined by the gods, or by tradition, and they regard other humans as threats or limitations to their freedom. The development of understanding in history, however, teaches human beings that their cultural differences are all different modes by which their essential nature

realizes itself. The ‘end’ of history is not absolute uniformity but a unity in difference that Hegel calls, “an achieved community of minds.” We will return in a moment to problems that beset Hegel’s preferred model of institutionalizing this community. For the moment it is essential to focus upon the essential human capacity involved in the development of our spiritual nature.

That capacity is human subjecthood. Unlike natural things, which are merely objects, i.e., fixed and given realities, humans are essentially subjects, i.e., active creators of objectivity. Traditional philosophy has sought the truth of things in their concept understood as a mental representation of their objective nature. Hegel, by contrast, draws philosophical attention to the reciprocal relationship between subject and object. What this means concretely, in the case of human nature, is that we cannot grasp its concept as a ready-made fixed reality. Like Mirandola, Hegel understands human nature as the capacity for self-determination. He goes beyond Mirandola, however, in so far as he understands the social world as the result of the self-externalization of humanity’s defining powers. As he writes, “The life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death ... but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. It is this power ... only by looking the negative in the face and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. This power is identical to what we earlier called the Subject, which, by giving determinateness an existence in its own element supersedes abstract immediacy ... and thus is authentic substance.” Authentic substance is the institutional context in which lives are lived. It is objective, in so far as it exists independently of individual wills understood abstractly and exerts determining force over them. It is equally subjective, however, in so far as it exists only by virtue of the collective work of individuals united in various social formations. As ‘authentic’ substance its objectivity and subjectivity would coincide. That means that the institutions of social life would be recognized by the associated citizens as their own work and reality, that is, as an objective confirmation of their subjective freedom.

In the most general terms then a free society would be one in which citizens were consciously confirmed in their independence and freedom by the laws and institutions in which they live. In Hegelian terms human beings understand their spiritual nature when the society which they create for themselves is free. That is, rather than appearing as external constraints on free activity the social institutions of a free society would be governed by the principle of cultivating free citizens. In such a world citizens would regard their social institutions not as burdens but as their own self-conscious creation. As he describes this state, “Reason is Spirit when its certainty of being all reality has been raised to truth, and it is conscious of itself as its own world, and of the world as itself.” This result, a society that citizens regard self-consciously as their own creation, as an expression and confirmation of their essential freedom, is the abstract, philosophical resolution of the contradiction between ideological and critical conceptions of human nature. Human nature as self-determining activity, realized in a society whose principle is the freedom of each, no longer restricts the range of functions that its citizens can engage in according to prejudicial concepts of human ‘types’, some of whom are naturally more capable than others. Hegel thus provides critical philosophy with the essential *formal* resolution of the contradiction between ideological and critical concepts of human nature. Unfortunately, the *content* with which he fills this form, his

preferred political structure, contradicts the emancipatory implications of his dialectical understanding.

Hegel's general concept of freedom depends upon reciprocity between individual and society. Recall his definition of spirit as I that is We (a community that exists by virtue of the individuals that constitute it) and We that is I (individuals that derive their identity from membership in their community). When, two decades later, in *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel theorizes the political structure that is supposed to embody this idea, the reciprocity between individual and community is lost. Instead, freedom is now understood one-sidedly as duty to the state. As he says, "The state is absolutely rational in as much as it is the actuality of the substantive will which it possesses in the particular self-consciousness once that self-consciousness has been raised to consciousness of its universality. This substantial unity is an absolute end in itself, in which freedom comes into its supreme right. On the other hand, this final end has supreme right against the individual, whose supreme duty is to be a member of the state." The contradiction between this particular understanding of the relationship between state and citizen and the universal idea of a humanly free society is clear. If individual freedom is just service to the state then the state clearly still functions as an oppressive external barrier to full self-determination. Rather than a reciprocal and dialectical relation in which the social whole exists for the sake of individuals, and individuals for the sake of the health of the social whole, individuals are here reduced to mere instruments of the state's universality. Thus, rather than confirm their freedom, the state becomes an abstract power that (as in Plato) absolutely determines the horizons of individual life. It was Marx who first systematically criticized this contradiction in Hegel, and who, in so doing, provides the content necessary to Hegel's formal resolution of the contradiction between ideological and critical theories of human nature.

The contradictory implications of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and his *Philosophy of Right* are evident in Marx's treatment of them. He finds in the *Phenomenology* the radical core of Hegel's dialectical method. "The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process ... that he thus grasps the essence of labor and comprehends objective man ... as the outcome of man's own labor." It was Hegel who, in the dialectic of lordship and bondage first understood labor as self-objectification, as a process involving both the cognitive and practical capacities of human beings through which a social world is created out of the givenness of nature.

Hegel, however, does not derive what Marx takes to be the radical political implications of this conception of labor. Instead, Hegel ultimately conceives of freedom as conscious recognition of the absolute right of the state over individual citizens. This conception of political freedom, Marx contends, contradicts Hegel's belief that political legitimacy depends upon the law being recognized as the citizens' universal self. The only political system that could satisfy that conception of political legitimacy, Marx argues, is democracy. Democracy, for Marx, has two essential sides. In its political dimension democracy entails popular determination of the laws that the citizens will obey. In its socio-economic dimension it demands popular control over the need-satisfying

resources and the systems of production that create them. Human nature is free to realize itself fully only in a society in which need-satisfaction for the sake of self-determined capacity development is the principle of production and popular participation is the principle of politics. Both of these dimensions will be explicated in turn.

Hegel understands legal legitimacy as the product of the individual's recognition that he or she is nothing without the law that binds the state together. This form of recognition, as argued, is one sided. Marx pioneered that criticism. As he writes in *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law*, "Hegel starts from the state and makes man the subjectivized state." That is, Hegel's political philosophy treats individual lives as instrumental to the unity of the state. "Democracy," Marx argues in contrast, "starts from man and makes the state subjectivized man." Thus democracy is the only political form capable of satisfying Hegel's own criterion of legal legitimacy, since only in a democracy is the law the self-conscious creation of collective civic deliberation.

Unlike liberal theories of democracy, however, Marx argues that if democracy remains a political form separated from the socio-economic system it fails to satisfy the value of self-determination. Democracy is not realized simply in a system of civil rights and universal suffrage. Instead it must extend beyond the political dimension into the determination of the principles and priorities of production. Otherwise, citizens can be free as political subjects but determined as mere objects by the economic forces generated by capitalist market relations. As he argues in *On The Jewish Question*, "the limits of political emancipation are evident at once from the fact that ... the state can be a free state without man being a free man. Being a free person, unfolding one's capacities according to self-chosen ends, presupposes that the production and distribution of the resources that everyone needs is undertaken according to an economic logic that prioritizes need satisfaction for the sake of capacity realization. Capitalism, however, subordinates need satisfaction and capacity development to its own reified self-expansion. Human life thus becomes dependent on economic forces that treat it as a mere instrument of their own development. This dependency cannot be solved simply through political democracy. If the economy is treated as a system in which private interests rightly rule, if a 'free market' is understood as one in which democratic authority has no business intervening, then material unfreedom will prevail.

Marx elaborates on this crucial difference between political freedom and human freedom in his explanation of the 'alienated' character of labor under capitalism. Recall that Marx understands labor as the dynamic essence of human nature. In the most general terms human beings are distinct as a species because they can collectively shape their life-horizons by creating social structures out of the givenness of nature. However, this deep or essential freedom of the human being is not fully realized in any given moment. In historical contexts where humans are directly dependent upon natural conditions their lives are hostage to natural calamities, as well as to systems of thought that see in nature moral hierarchies that society replicates. In developed capitalist society, ironically, where the wealth produced by the economy frees humanity from direct dependence on nature, human beings become dependent on the systematic form their own labor takes. That is, rather than wealth being used to satisfy needs, and the satisfaction of needs in turn freeing individuals to reflect upon and cultivate their

capacities, it is used to drive system expansion. Human needs and capacities become mere instruments of the accumulation of capital. As he argues, “in estranging man from 1) nature and 2) himself, his own active functions, his life-activity, estranged labor estranges the species from man. It changes for him the life of the species [free self-creation] into a means of individual life.” Thus society once again takes on the appearance of being a set of institutions opposed to individual freedom. This opposition is no longer a problem of metaphysics, however, but of the social structure of capitalism, rooted as it is in the universal dependence of human life on market forces.

Marx’s solution to this problem is the revolutionary overthrow of capitalist society by the proletariat. However, with the benefit of historical reflection we can see that this particular solution is inadequate to its end—the all-round development of human capacities in a democratic and self-determining society. It is inadequate because, while Marx’s conception of labor, interpreted from a life-grounded perspective, means the cultivation of all creative human capacities and powers, the class charged with creating the social conditions in which these can flourish, the proletariat, does not comprehend the total wealth of human affective, cognitive, and physical capacities in those aspects of its class position which oppose it to capitalism. The development of the cognitive and affective forms of human capacities is not intrinsically related to the class position of the proletariat under capitalism. While it is certainly true that the struggles of workers have been absolutely central to the humanization and democratization of capitalism, they have proven not to be the ‘universal class’ which Marx took them for. This fact has the further implication that their class interest in ending exploitation does not necessarily comprehend the types of institutional changes that other oppressed groups require. In short, the ‘universality’ of the interest of the working class is abstract; their emancipation does not entail the complete emancipation of human capacities from totalitarian socio-economic dynamics or the concrete conditions for the end of other historically central forms of oppression.

Because socialism is linked in the contemporary political imagination with totalitarianism that both Marx’s political arguments and the critical conception of human nature that underlay them have been rejected. Since his critical conception is the result of a dialectical development of the concept of human nature through millennia of metaphysical reflection, a critique of the most developed form of that conception entails a critique of the whole history of metaphysical theorizing about human nature. If we are to defend a coherent concept of human nature today, and maintain that such a concept is indispensable to the turning of social forces away from their life-blind path, we must take seriously the postmodern deconstruction of the concept of human nature. The argument will thus now turn to that deconstruction. It will begin with the roots of the postmodern critique in Nietzsche and then explore how Nietzsche’s attack on essentialism is realized as a critique of oppression in the work of Derrida.

3. The Deconstruction of Essentialist Concepts of Human Nature

Essentialism may be defined as a metaphysical doctrine that understands individuals as members of classes and classes as distinguished from one another by an inner principle of identity. This inner principle of identity defines both the type of thing that an entity is (the class to which it belongs) and the set of potentials it is possible for it to realize. As

should be clear, this form of thinking is central to the philosophical development of the critical theory of human nature. The essence of human being is its nature, and its nature both distinguishes humanity as a species and grounds a normative conception of what sort of life a human being ought to lead. If essentialism is fundamentally flawed, as Nietzsche, and following him, postmodern theory contends, then the attempt to define human nature has been fundamentally wrongheaded. More than just wrongheaded, however, postmodern thinkers contend that the cause of oppression and exclusion (denial of life value to definite groups) is essentialist theorizing about human nature. The philosophical critique of essentialism will be explained and the problems of the political theory that follows from it will be examined.

Nietzsche's argument begins with an assault on the metaphysical principle that individuals are defined by the species to which they belong. Species are distinguished (metaphysically) from each other by essences. Aristotle, as we saw, believed that one sort of living thing was distinguished from another by the form of its soul. Different forms of soul produce different species. Nietzsche contends, on the contrary, that there are no essences in nature, and therefore no species. Essences are the products of human minds ignoring the real differences that characterize individual things. As he writes, "the disregarding of the individual and real furnishes us with the idea, as it likewise gives us the form [essence], whereas nature knows no form or idea, and therefore no species." In a scientific age Nietzsche's critique of ideal forms sounds straightforwardly true. It is certainly not my intention to maintain the reality of ideal essences of an Aristotelian type. It does not follow, however, that one cannot speak meaningfully of different natures, and in particular of human nature. As we have seen, the development of the critical theory of human nature is marked by a progressive move away from ideal essences towards a social-organic conception of human capacities. This point will be considered again in the conclusion. For the moment it is important to further spell out Nietzsche's critique.

As the previous quotation reveals, Nietzsche believes that human minds create essences. Why? Because, Nietzsche contends, human beings are creatures that require order. The foundation of order is the metaphysical concept of truth, that is, that there is a world outside of ourselves that is intrinsically meaningful and orderly and which is the objective ground of our knowledge of it. As he asserts, "Man, both from necessity and from boredom wants to exist socially [thus] ... he must needs make peace. The first conclusion of peace brings with it something that looks like the first step towards that enigmatical bent for truth ... a uniformly valid and binding designation of things is invented." Truth, for Nietzsche, and the concept of essence that it presupposes, is thus normalizing rather than normative. It does not capture anything real in the world on the basis of which human beings can give a proper orientation to their lives; on the contrary, it imposes order where in reality there is none.

The problem with traditional philosophical means of imposing order, according to Nietzsche, is that it represses just that creative energy which is its secret origin. His solution is to make this creative energy conscious, that is, to openly affirm that there is no truth save what people choose to invent. This 'transvaluation of values' however, is self-undermining. On the one hand he affirms the human mind as essentially creative, and thus implies that unlike other species (whose reality, recall, he has denied) human

beings can consciously create their own conditions of existence. In short, he asserts that human beings have a nature and that it is to create truth. On the other hand, however, he denies that human beings have a nature and thus undermines the foundation of the critique that he launches against metaphysics, namely, that it represses human creativity.

This contradiction plays itself out in his later work as a pathological celebration of brutality and selfishness. Superficially Nietzsche appears to be a critique of oppressive normalization from the perspective of radical individuality. Zarathustra says, for example, “behold the believers of all beliefs! Whom do they hate the most? Him who breaketh up their tables of values, the breaker, the law breaker; he, however, is the creator.” If one focuses simply on the creative act of iconoclasm one could interpret Nietzsche as contributing significantly to the critical conception of human nature. Yet this is only one side of Nietzsche’s critique. As he affirms the lonely iconoclast resisting imposed mediocrity he at the same time affirms, in a quite conservative way, the underlying values of the imperialist society of which he himself was a member. Consider the following definition of will to power in the context of the modes of human activity characteristic of nineteenth century capitalism, in particular in the colonized world: “life itself is appropriation, injury, conquest of the strange and weak, suppression, severity, obtrusion of peculiar forms, incorporation, and ... putting it mildest, exploitation ... life itself is Will to Power.” The argument here is not that Nietzsche is consciously naturalizing the social behavior of European imperialists, but rather that this definition of the Will to Power, whether Nietzsche intends it or not, does in fact assert the same ‘values’ as that imperialist project. Appropriation, conquest of the strange and weak, severity, exploitation; each one describes the reality of workers and colonial peoples under conditions of nineteenth century capitalism. The ease with which his critique of essentialism can be assimilated by the socially dominant values of nineteenth century capitalism is strong evidence in support of Marcuse’s general conclusion with regard to anti-essentialist arguments. He contends that “a theory that wants to eradicate from science the concept of essence succumbs to a helpless relativism, thus promoting the very powers whose thought it wants to combat.” Marcuse’s warning, unfortunately, has been ignored by postmodern critics influenced by Nietzsche’s anti-essentialism. As will become clear, the self-contradiction into which postmodern philosophy falls is further vindication of Marcuse’s argument.

The example chosen, the work of Jacques Derrida, is the most philosophically astute articulation of the themes that have become associated in the popular imagination with postmodernism. He is therefore the best test case of my thesis that the self-contradiction of postmodern criticism is the strongest evidence in favor of the necessity of grounding emancipatory political philosophy in a critical concept of human nature. Derrida’s deconstruction aims at disclosing the grounds of possibility of metaphysical philosophy in that which always remains outside of and beyond the control of conceptual thinking. Since metaphysics presupposes this outside, but can never grasp it conceptually, the goal of metaphysical thought- a unified understanding of the fundamental principles, elements, and dynamics of Being- can never be achieved.

Metaphysics, the argument has noted, understands the truth of Being as ideal essence, and understands knowledge as the conceptual grasp of the essence of things. Metaphysical knowledge is not a benign relationship between minds and things,

however. As Derrida argues, “the rapport of self-identity is itself always a rapport of violence with the other; so that the notions of property, appropriation, and self-presence, so central to logocentric metaphysics, are essentially dependent on an oppositional relationship with otherness.” Derrida picks up Nietzsche’s critique of truth as normalization, but uses it to criticize the marginalization of concrete others in Western history. That is, according to Derrida, the oppression of minorities is ultimately grounded in the fundamental form of metaphysical thinking. Metaphysics privileges identity over difference and stasis over change; it knows by appropriating (making proper, one’s own) what is initially different from the self. Thus, the content of its notion of essence, when the essence concerned is the essence of human being, is always the identity of the group invested with the power to define truth. Thus the essence of humanity, Derrida believes, is always defined in such a way as to violently exclude (and legitimate the exclusion of) differently identified groups. The deconstruction of knowledge as appropriation is thus at the same time the deconstruction of politics as the mastery of social differences.

Derrida argues that the solution to oppression lies not so much in the creation of new political movements as in an ethical reversal of the priority of self and other. Thus, central to Derrida’s deconstruction of metaphysics and the politics of mastery is a deconstruction of the category of subject. Derrida means by ‘subject’ the idea, discussed above, that human beings are essentially world-creating agents. In line with the general strategy of deconstruction, Derrida draws attention to the way in which forces outside the subject constitute it. If subjecthood is a response to external forces, it cannot be primary, that is, it cannot be properly understood as a set of underlying capacities that collectively create the social world. The key ‘outside’ responsible for the constitution of subjecthood is language. Derrida argues in a seminal essay that “the subject (in its identity with itself ... in its self-consciousness) is inscribed in language, is a ‘function’ of language,’ becomes a speaking subject only by making its speech conform ... to the system of rules of language as a system of differences.” In order to become conscious of ourselves as creators of our world, we have to be conscious of ourselves. In order to be conscious of ourselves we must signify this consciousness to ourselves. In order to signify this consciousness to ourselves we must use language. In using language we ‘give ourselves’ over to a system of rules governing the combination of the different values that define it. These rules are not and cannot be brought under the conscious control of subjects, individually or collectively. Hence human subjecthood is not our defining nature. It is a function of certain constraints placed upon language by metaphysics.

However, Derrida is not simply making an esoteric philosophical argument. His primary concern, as noted above, is to deconstruct subjecthood for the sake of promoting its ethical transformation. To recognize the human dependence on language is to recognize the priority of that which is not thought over that which thinks, the ‘other’ of thinking over the self that thinks. The aim of this inversion is to promote new forms of human interaction and community. As he argues, a society no longer rooted in the value of mastery would be “a pluralism of radical separation, a pluralism in which the plurality is not that of a total community, that of a cohesion or coherence with the whole.” Whereas the metaphysical understanding of community, structured by the model of knowledge as appropriation, privileges homogenous forms of human society, that is, counts as a

member of the human community only that which is identical to the authority that governs it, a deconstructive pluralism values the difference that defines the other over the self-identity of the subject. In contrast to appropriation Derrida affirms the value of hospitality. The essential relationship between self and other is the opening of the self towards the other, welcoming and assuming responsibility for the other in its difference from the self. He maintains that “hospitality assumes ‘radical separation’ as experience of the alterity of the other, as relation to the other ... as deferential bearing.” The hospitable welcome does not subsume the other under categories, it lets the other be; it does not insist that the other become like the self, it defers to the other in its difference.

As with Nietzsche’s understanding of individuality there is in Derrida’s notion of hospitality a contribution to a fuller understanding of a critical concept of human nature. Derrida is not saying that the other is inhuman. Rather, he is saying that just because the other is different from the self it must be respected, deferred to, welcomed. Yet, this contribution only makes sense if the critical concept of human nature is presupposed, not deconstructed. Derrida fails to distinguish between ideological conceptions of human nature whose function is to legitimate social hierarchies and critical conceptions whose function is to understand how a self-same human nature produces concrete differences. Because he fails to distinguish these opposed meanings, his deconstruction of subjecthood, if followed through consistently, would deconstruct the very foundation of the reason why the self ought to be open to and welcome the other. The reason why we should let the other be, for Derrida, is because the other has something about its self to reveal to us (namely, its difference or its alterity). If the other were not (at least potentially) a self-determining being, if it were simply a function of language, it would have nothing proper to itself to reveal to us. Consequently, there would be no reason to let it be. Its being, everyone’s being, would be equally empty. But Derrida wants us to show concern for the other. The reason behind that concern must therefore be that if the other is not allowed to be who it is it is fundamentally harmed. But if it is harmed something real in itself must be damaged. This ‘something real’ can be nothing other than the capacity to reveal or determine itself, i.e., its subjecthood, which, nonetheless, Derrida deconstructs.

The reality of this contradiction is proven by Derrida himself. While never explicitly withdrawing from the deconstruction of self-determining subjecthood as human nature, Derrida invokes it in his explanation of the value of alterity. It becomes clear that alterity, mere difference, has no value in and of itself. Rather, in opening ourselves to the difference of the other from the self we are opening ourselves to the “humanity of the human in general.” That is, a shared humanity shines through those differences that characterize concrete others. Human beings are not functions of language but active creators of themselves. The gravest injustice that can be done to such beings is to imprison them in social systems and structures of thought that prevent them from being in reality what they are in essence. Derrida thus looks towards a universal politics of solidarity, rather than a micropolitics of difference, as the road towards the conditions in which the humanity of others can be realized. Thus he hopes for the development of a “humanitarian politics ... a humanitarian commitment that effectively operates beyond the interests of Nation States.” What lies behind the interests of nation states is the interests of the human being. The interest of the human being, its humanity, is the realization of its capacities to become a unique and singular instance of human value. It

cannot become a unique and singular instance of human value if *ideological* definitions of its nature are imposed on it. A critical conception of human nature, by contrast, is the only ground upon which a coherent critique of ideological conceptions is possible. Derrida's failure to distinguish between ideological and critical conceptions of human nature thus embroils deconstruction in the contradiction of simultaneously affirming and denying its necessary normative grounds in the concept of human nature as subjecthood. If the most radical deconstruction of subjecthood proves self-confuting, then this result is powerful evidence of subjecthood's necessity as the normative foundation of a coherent theory of social justice. It remains now simply to free this concept from the metaphysical language of its development by reconstructing it in life-grounded terms.

4. Human Nature from a Life-Grounded Perspective

A life-grounded conception of human nature rests on the principle that the development of the general social-organic capacities of the human being is the intrinsically valuable foundation of a good and just society. McMurtry, whose work has systematized the conception of life-grounded value systems, writes that "production and distribution for life need, and that, in turn, for life-capacity and experience in more comprehensive enjoyment and expression- this is the only *ultimate* value on earth." What McMurtry calls life-capacities we have encountered throughout the history of the development of a critical conception of human nature as form, soul, self-transforming nature, rationality, and subjecthood. The re-definition of these metaphysical concepts of human nature in terms of social-organic capacities frees the theory of human nature from the problems intrinsic to the positing of an immaterial form at work in material nature. Human nature, that which distinguishes humans from other species and grounds the meaning of a good life for humans is not an immaterial essence but rather the range of needs and capacities our organism makes possible. The human organism, however, is not an abstract physical structure but is always determined in the social contexts that human beings collectively establish. Hence the description of human nature as social-organic. This social-organic nature establishes objective criteria for the evaluation of any given social form. Those societies are unjust where human beings, whatever their particular identity, are deprived of those resources that they need as material conditions for the free development of their defining capabilities. A good and just society, by contrast, takes as its organizing principle the satisfaction of the material conditions for free self-determination. As is evident, the life-grounded translation of the idea of human nature preserves its essential normative function while obviating objections (such as Nietzsche's) that there simply are not self-realizing ideal forms at work in the natural world. That may be the case, but it does not follow that human beings are not active and self-realizing. What makes them active and self-realizing is not an ideal essence, but rather the nature of their social-organic capacities, and in particular the capacity for self-conscious projection and self-determination, that define them as *human* beings. To block this self-active nature is the fundamental form of harm precisely because it denies, represses, or destroys just that which makes life valuable for human beings.

The claim that the fundamental harm suffered by human beings is the destruction of their social-organic capacities is not groundless assertion but is proven by the reality of struggle. All life-forms resist their own destruction and strive to maintain connections with the resources that they need in order to sustain themselves. Anyone who has fished

will have seen the terrible sight of the landed fish gasping for oxygen while it flails about the bottom of the boat. Human beings, however, are capable not only of resisting social structures of oppressive need-deprivation but of collectively planning alternatives and working together to realize them. Anyone who has read human history will know of the battles of women, workers, the enslaved, and the marginalized to transform the institutional structures that oppress them. There is nothing illusory about the nature that enables them to do this. Human beings are capable of contrasting existing states of affairs with consciousness of their own needs and hopes. When social structures militate against the satisfaction of their needs and the realization of their hopes, distinct people who face a common impediment can identify the cause and work towards its removal. Every successful struggle of the oppressed is proof of the reality of this essential nature.

Thus the critical conception of human nature, spelled out in life-grounded terms, illuminates that which is universal underneath the distinctive histories of different oppressed groups. From this perspective oppression is best understood as socially structured deprivation of the resources any group needs to freely develop its defining human capacities. Needs must be rigorously distinguished from contingent wants and desires. McMurtry's criterion of need: "N is a need if and only if, and to the extent that, deprivation of [it] always leads to a reduction in organic capability" enables us to make that crucial distinction. Whereas a person or group deprived of the objects of contingent wants or desires can banish feelings of harm by reinterpreting what is of fundamental significance in life, a person or group deprived of what they need cannot banish the reality of harm by reinterpreting their needs. To be deprived of the desire to gorge oneself on junk food is no harm once one realizes the damage to one's health that such behavior causes. To be deprived of sufficient calories, on the other hand, will always reduce the energy and activity of which the person or group is capable. The same can be said of education, health care, the need for housing, for affective care and connection between people, for socially and individually meaningful work, and so forth. If we deny the objectivity of need and capacity then we lose the ground necessary to identify and transform oppressive social structures.

Hence in general terms the life-grounded translation of the critical conception of human nature concludes that the more a group is deprived of need-satisfying resources, the more oppressed it is. Those who 'live at the margins of subsistence' in the words of the UN Development Report with which this began, are thus the most oppressed people on earth. But need deprivation does not only take the form of gross physical suffering. Our capacities to think and feel also presuppose that affective and pedagogical needs are met. The higher level development of our capacities through the course of a whole life presupposes that a need for free time and access to diverse natural and physical environments are met. As should be evident, the idea that capacity development is the true intrinsic value of human life is not a fanciful posit of metaphysics but the reality that people strive for over the course of their lives. To deny this reality would mean denying the difference between the life of a free person and the life of a slave. What distinguishes the two is that the life of a free person is not only richer in realized capacities but more deeply the result of that person's own efforts in supportive social environments. No matter how hard the slave works (and historically slaves were worked to death) his or her life will always be limited to doing what the master tells him or her to do.

Judging from the perspective of this life-grounded understanding of human nature, the essential reason for gross physical and intellectual need-deprivation is the fact that the capacities of life are not treated as of intrinsic value. The reason why they are not, however, is not because of the moral callousness of individuals. The moral callousness of individuals, rather, is a result of the value system that governs global economic dynamics and which programs the consciousness of the classes that benefit most from their unregulated operation. That value system necessarily treats human needs and capacities as nothing but instruments of the system's own profitable expansion. Public policy for the last twenty years, in the 'advanced' West and North and in the 'underdeveloped' South has systematically attacked need-satisfying public infrastructure and reprogrammed (or attempted to re-program) all major social institutions to serve the further expansion of the global market. The UN Development Reports record the results of this inhuman experiment. The inhumanity of the experiment is proven in the empirically verifiable results of its real-world implications: destruction of habitat and natural environment, mass impoverishment and loss of independent means of subsistence, the destruction of aboriginal cultures and life-ways, loss of living and cultural diversity, unemployment and the production of surplus populations (generally concentrated in the very young and the aged), roll backs of life-grounded victories and the subordination of social institutions to market-service. If the experiment is inhuman, there must be a standard of humanity against which its inhumanity is determined. That standard of humanity, present in contradictory form throughout the history of metaphysical speculation, can today be stated clearly and uncontroversially as the defining organic capacities of the human being. Their reality is evidenced in what we have achieved in the way of need-satisfying public infrastructure, but better, sadly, in the fact that people everywhere are still fighting for the material conditions of the realization of their human nature.

Glossary

- Deconstruction:** A philosophical practice of disclosing the inner productive contradictions of classical metaphysical concepts aimed at opening human thinking to new and shifting horizons of meaning.
- Essentialism:** A metaphysical theory which maintains that the truth of existing things is an inner principle of determination known only to the mind, not the senses.
- Freedom:** Relative to human beings, their capability to determine their social environments in accordance with self-chosen end. Identical to subjecthood.
- Human Nature:** The specific difference of human being understood both descriptively (what we are in distinction to other life forms) and normatively (how we ought to develop our distinguishing capabilities). It is subject to both critical and ideological formulations.
- Life-Ground:** the universal basis of all value, the maximal development of the capabilities of living things relative to their degree of organic and social complexity.
- Oppression:** A situation arising from social structures that impede a definite group or groups from freely expressing their subjecthood.

Subjecthood: the defining capability of human beings to actively shape their social environment in accordance with freely determined values and objectives.

Bibliography

Aronson, Ronald. (1995). *After Marxism*. New York: Guilford. [An important effort to save the spirit of Marx's critique of capitalism from its obsolete political form].

Bronner, Stephen Eric. (2004). *Reclaiming the Enlightenment*. New York: Columbia University Press. (A spirited defence of the importance of Enlightenment universalism and rationalism for any coherent political theory today].

Cairns, Huntington, and Hamilton, Edith, eds. (1989). *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [The classical collection of the complete dialogues of Plato].

Cassirer, Ernst, Kristeller, Paul Oskar, Randall, John Herman, eds. (1948). *Renaissance Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [Excellent selection of renaissance philosophical texts].

Condorcet, (1988). *Esquisse d'une tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humaine*. Paris Flammarion. [A seminal text in the development of the Enlightenment philosophy of history].

Derrida, Jacques. (1982). "Difference," *Margins of Philosophy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. [The essential explanation of the key ideas of deconstruction].

Derrida, Jacques. (1984). "Deconstruction and the Other," *Dialogues With Contemporary Continental Thinkers*. Richard Kearney, ed. [An interview in which Derrida makes his philosophical position accessible to non-specialists].

Derrida, Jacques. (1999). *Adieu: For Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press. [An exploration of the ethical implications of deconstruction].

Descartes, Rene. (1989). *Discourse on Method and the Meditations*. Amherst NY: Prometheus Books. [The two seminal texts in early modern philosophy responsible for a methodological revolution in its practice].

Hegel, G.W.F. (1977). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Hegel's dialectical account of the emergence and realization of human self-conscious freedom].

Hegel, G.W.F. (1967). *Philosophy of Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. [Hegel's theory of the institutional structure of a free state].

Marcuse, Herbert. (1968). "The Concept of Essence," *Negations*. Boston: Beacon Press. [An interpretation of the metaphysical concept of essence from the perspective of Critical Theory].

Marx, Karl. (1975). *Collected Works, Volume 3, 1843-1844*. New York: International Publishers. [This volume of Marx's collected works contains his most important early writings on Hegel and alienated labor].

McKeon, Richard, ed. (1966). *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York: Random House. [The classic collection of Aristotle's key works in English].

McMurtry, John. (1978). *The Structure of Marx's World-view*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. [An original analysis of the conceptual framework of Marx's social philosophy and understanding of humanity].

McMurtry, John. (1998). *Unequal Freedoms*. Toronto: Garamond. [McMurtry's first systematic exposition of the life-ground of value].

McMurtry, John. (2002). *Value Wars*. London: Pluto Press. [An incisive account of the fundamental value conflicts of the contemporary era].

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1965). "Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense," *The Philosophy of Nietzsche*, Geoffrey Clive, ed. New York: Meridian. [A centrally important early essay on the aesthetic and creative value of truth].

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1982). *Thus Spake Zarathustra, The Portable Nietzsche*. Walter Kaufmann, ed. New York: Penguin Books. [Nietzsche's *magnum opus*].

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1989). *Beyond Good and Evil*. Amherst NY: Prometheus Books. [Nietzsche's critique of traditional morality and defense of the Will to Power as the origin of moral categories].

Noonan, Jeff. (2003). *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press. [Criticises the deconstruction of human nature as conceptually incoherent and politically self-undermining].

Biographical Sketch

Jeff Noonan was born in 1968 in Sudbury, Ontario, Canada. He received his BA (Philosophy and Social and Political Thought) from York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada in 1991, his MA (Philosophy) and Ph. D (Philosophy) from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, in 1993 and 1996, respectively. He taught as a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Alberta from 1996-1998 and is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario, Canada. He also serves on the Coordinating Committee of the Centre for Social Justice, University of Windsor, the Academic Advisory Board of the Humanities Research Group, and the Coordinating Committee of the Labor Studies Program. He is the author of *Critical Humanism and the Politics of Difference* (McGill-Queen's University Press), 2003 (short-listed for the Canadian Philosophical Association's Book Prize, 2005) and more than twenty articles and reviews that have appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *ReThinking Marxism*, *Res Publica*, and *Social Theory and Practice*