MARX, MARXISM, AND HUMAN NATURE

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INTRODUCTION

What is human nature? Does it have any positive content, or is it a chimerical invention by those with political ambitions? Since the Enlightenment, humanity has produced three significant answers to the question.\(^1\) The first is the Romantic view put forth by people like Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Utopian socialists. According to this view, people are basically moral and altruistic, but they have been “corrupted by the materialism of civilized life” (Gintis 377). The solution to this corruption is a return to a non-materialistic existence brought about by the right social institutions that will encourage humanity’s latent good will and cooperation. The Classical view, exemplified by people like Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, “holds that people are fundamentally self-interested, although long-run enlightened self-interest may at times appear superficially to be moral and altruistic” (377). Evolutionary biology and contemporary economic theory tend to adopt this perspective, and they submit that regulation of potential human destructiveness through incentives and appeal to self-interest will maintain a stable society. The third view is that of the tabula rasa, the favored concept of John Locke and adopted by the founders of modern sociology and anthropology. According to this perspective, “people are so widely malleable by their social environment that the very concept of human nature must be rejected” (377).

\(^1\) These three answers are described in Herbert Gintis, “Moral Sense and Material Interests,” *Social Research* 73.2 (2006): 377.
I will not attempt to hide my own view. I accept the Classical position as the most accurate and true theory about human nature. I do not believe that humans are blank slates upon which arbitrary cultural constructions inscribe personality, character, attitudes, dispositions, and beliefs. I do not believe that humans, returned to a prehistoric state of existence and in the absence of modern social institutions, would create heaven on earth. I do believe that humans, despite their capacity for cooperation and altruism, are capable of immoral and destructive behavior. And, I do believe that at least some of the causes for such behavior extend back millions of years into evolutionary history, long before modern social institutions had the opportunity to corrupt humanity.

I designate as “human nature” the attitudes, dispositions, instincts, and behaviors that can be observed universally in the human species independent of historical time or cultural location. I believe such universal traits must exist because they are at least partly caused by an evolutionary process that has been ongoing since the beginning of the world. From an evolutionary perspective, modern social institutions, particular cultures, and civilization in general comprise the minutest fraction of human experience. While I do not believe that the influence these phenomena have had on humanity is equivalent to their temporal existence, I do want to establish a boundary on their influence in order to oppose the mistaken idea that, at some point in human history, we became disconnected from our evolutionary past and entered into an autonomous realm of social and cultural construction.

When defining human nature and placing it in the context of the humanities, I am guided by the work of Joseph Carroll, an English literature professor and literary
Darwinist who believes scholars in the humanities have ignored the natural sciences for too long and that the humanities will continue to lose their significance the longer this ignorance persists. For Carroll, human nature involves basic animal and social motives, including “self-preservation, sexual desire, jealousy, maternal love, favoring kin, belonging to a social group, desiring prestige” (Carroll 13). Each of these characteristics is a complex amalgam of causal factors among which biological and psychological evolution cannot be ignored. In addition to these motivations are the moral sentiments that exist universally in humans, such as “resentment against wrongs, gratitude for kindness, honesty in fulfilling contracts, disgust at cheating, and the sense of justice in its simplest forms—reciprocation and revenge” (13). Again, these moral notions are influenced not only by culture and society, but also by biological and psychological evolution. Living out these concepts is a complicated process since humans are also influenced by “the primacy of self-interest and the prevalence of self-serving delusion, manipulative deceit, vanity, and hypocrisy” (13).

The Standard Social Science Model (SSSM) of the 20th century opposes all of these statements because they are derived from the non-social premise that evolutionary history plays a part in shaping who we are. Thus, environmental determinism is the *sine qua non* of sociological theory and practice. According to Ian McEwan, implicit in the idea of the definitive moment, of rupture with the past, is the notion that human nature is a specific historical product, shaped by shared values, circumstances of upbringing within a certain civilization—in other words, that there is no human nature at all beyond that which develops at a particular time
and in a particular culture. By this view the mind is an all-purpose, infinitely adaptable computing machine operating a handful of wired-in rules. We are born tabula rasa, and it is our times that shape us. (McEwan 52)

It is the epistemological notion of a “definitive moment” that leads us into error. In our zeal to identify points of origin, historical ruptures, and momentous events, we assume the theoretical conditions and results are universally applicable to human existence. But in biological and psychological evolution, there are no “radical breaks” in continuity. Evolution is a ceaselessly deliberate and incorrigible process that is incompatible with this view of the revocable advance of history.

In the humanities, the assumptions of the SSSM can be readily identified in postmodern theories and anti-essentialist philosophies. In framing human nature as a political issue, “postmodernists argue that the very notion of a universal human nature is a damaging form of ideological mystification . . . under the guise of a benevolent concern for the good of all humankind, the real purpose of the human nature myth is to impose one particular set of male Eurocentric values onto the rest of the world” (Wells and McFadden 2). In other words, any discovery made by evolutionary scientists about a sex difference has nothing to do with factual correspondence to an objective truth about sex differences—the “discovery” is only a discursive strategy that operates to oppress a particular identity group. And, naturally, such a conclusion is accepted without reservation because implicit in the interpretation is an anti-essentialist presupposition—
i.e., scientific discoveries must be discursive power strategies because there is no such thing as “sex” to begin with.  

Another anti-essentialist claim is that aggression is not part of human nature. Aggression and its violent consequences are familiar phenomena to those who study the evolutionary history of animal species, and the human animal is no exception. Despite a concerted effort by many 20th century anthropologists to minimize the occurrence of intraspecific violence among prehistoric peoples, the hard evidence of prehistoric violence cannot be ignored. Archaeologists are discovering evidence of such violence through “ostearchaeological evidence, ancient weaponry, representations of violence in iconography and funerary ritual, and the remains of enclosed and defended settlements and refuges” (Armit 505). These findings are shedding new light on our human ancestry and reorienting the way we think about our lives today in relation to human life in the past. For some, this changing perspective is feared because it tends to mitigate efforts to bring about political conformity, or it is suspected (erroneously) that this new perspective will usher in a new age of biologically based discrimination. These fears should not be allowed to suppress the truth about human history. In all things, truth must guide us because political action based in error is doomed to fail, sometimes in dangerous ways.

In his major work on the occurrence of war and homicide among prehistoric peoples, anthropologist Lawrence Keeley demonstrates that the Rousseauan myth of the

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2 This claim seems counter-intuitive, but we shall see in Chapter 1 that there is a biologically based argument to be made against categorizing persons according to sex.
“Noble Savage” is just that, a myth. By studying ancient burial sites, evidence is gained to support the theory that prehistoric peoples were just as violent, if not more, than civilized peoples.

Several of the rare burials of earliest modern humans in central and western Europe, dating from 34,000 to 24,000 years ago, show evidence of violent death. At Grimaldi in Italy, a projectile point was embedded in the spinal column of a child's skeleton dating to the Aurignacian (the culture of the earliest modern humans in Europe, ca. 36,000 to 27,000 years ago). (Keeley 37)

During the Upper Paleolithic centuries (35,000 to 24,000 years ago), evidence of mass burials of men, women, and children have been found in former Czechoslovakia. The skeletal remains show evidence of weapons trauma including a high incidence of male cranial fractures. In the Nile Valley of Egypt the burial site of a male has been found existing from 20,000 years ago. The skeletal remains show stone projectile points embedded in the abdomen and upper arm. In another cemetery at Gebel Sahaba in Egypt dating back to 14,000 years ago, the existence of brutal warfare is demonstrated by 40 percent of the men, women, and children buried at this site having multiple stone projectile points embedded in their skeletons, including head and neck wounds on the children indicating that they were executed. This was not an isolated event since many of

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3 Keeley also thinks the idea that prehistoric peoples lived in a Hobbesian nightmare of suffering, violence, and death is equally mythological. According to this view, every new idea, invention, or innovation that civilized peoples have introduced serves a kind of teleological progress. This view is often erroneously attributed to supporters of scientific progress in general, but it is worth mentioning for those who might believe the myth despite the copious amount of refutations by scientists. Keeley will argue that the truth is somewhere in the middle, that prehistoric peoples could be both socially productive and socially destructive.
the adults had wounds that had already healed, indicating that war was a common occurrence.

More evidence of warfare among prehistoric peoples includes fortifications—structures that many anthropologists claim had nothing to do with war. However, at several of these sites, thousands of flint arrowheads have been found distributed around the fortifications, concentrated along the palisade and the gates, indicating that these structures had been defended against archery attacks (Keeley 18). And, just as anthropologists claim that these structures are not fortifications, they also want to claim that the weapons used by prehistoric peoples have only symbolic functions. But, the logic of such claims is dubious. As Keeley points out,

[These deconstructionist archaeological interpretations would be analogous to declaring that in contemporary Western culture automobiles and trucks are only symbols of status, masculinity, and liberty and that freeways are merely impractical ritual arenas for the enactment of rituals of status, masculinity, and personal autonomy while never mentioning that these artifacts and structures are fundamentally a means of transportation. (Keeley 19)]

Instead of explaining away the prevalence of weaponry in prehistoric times by claiming that such weapons were for show, Keeley argues that anthropologists should take the common sense approach and view these weapons as having practical functions. No doubt a man can receive a measure of symbolic capital from the car he drives, but this fact should not obscure the larger point that he uses this car to drive every day. Nor should anthropologists ignore the brutal tradition of taking “trophies” such as scalps and heads
that “were often included among the spoils of war because they were important tokens for reckoning male status or were thought to enhance a warrior's spiritual power” (Keeley 100). True, these trophies had symbolic meaning, but they were also acquired through brutally violent means.

Keeley argues that the myth of the Noble Savage implies a “doctrine of the pacified past” according to which the only answer for the problem of war and violence “is a return to tribal conditions and the destruction of all civilization” (Keeley 179). Such a solution would be a disaster since we know that prehistoric peoples were no less violent than civilized peoples are today. In fact, judging strictly by percentages of populations that have died violently, contemporary civilizations are much better off than their prehistoric predecessors. Idealism is not sufficient to overcome human nature. As Carroll argues, Darwin knew that human nature creates culture, and our ideals and public policy must reflect this fact: “Understanding human nature—really getting down to the details in neurology, anatomy, physiology, hormones, and behavioral dispositions encoded in genes—that is the only chance we have of constructing social systems that do not blow up in our faces” (Carroll 273). Accepting human nature does not make us racists, chauvinists, or closeted eugenicists; it makes us seekers of truth and more responsible citizens.

In the following chapters, I will argue that human beings possess a stable human nature that has been formed over millions of years of evolutionary history. Through the mechanism of natural selection, phenotypic traits and behaviors have evolved for the sole purpose of ensuring the survival of the organism that carries genetic information. This
means that there is interspecific, genetic continuity across evolutionary history. On this point, I quote Robert Trivers’ excellent summary.

The chimpanzee and the human share about 99.5 per cent of their evolutionary history, yet most human thinkers regard the chimp as a malformed, irrelevant oddity while seeing themselves as stepping-stones to the Almighty. To an evolutionist this cannot be so. There exists no objective basis on which to elevate one species above another. Chimp and human, lizard and fungus, we have all evolved over some three billion years by a process known as natural selection.

Within each species some individuals leave more surviving offspring than others, so that the inheritable traits (genes) of the reproductively successful become more numerous in the next generation. This is natural selection: the non-random differential reproduction of genes. Natural selection has built us, and it is natural selection we must understand if we are to comprehend our own identities. (Trivers xix)

Thus, to understand our own nature, we must view our subjective experience and behavioral patterns in the context of natural selection. We must also look to other animal species to observe in them the traits and behaviors that we ourselves possess. In Chapter 1, I will focus on two such aspects—aggression and sexual dimorphism—to see how evolutionary history, natural selection, and the replication and transfer of genetic information throughout the process of speciation connect humans to their primitive ancestors. I will argue that both aggression and sexual dimorphism can be understood as stable aspects of human nature, and they influence how we behave.
I also consider in this chapter the opposing position which I call social construction—the theory that human nature, if it exists at all, is wholly constituted by social institutions, cultural formations, and historical processes. When I use the term “social construction,” I will be referring to the strong version according to which the environment is presupposed to be the only factor that constitutes the individual and determines behavior. The opposite and equally radical argument is that biology is the only factor that constitutes the individual and determines behavior. I will argue in Chapter 1 that both positions are wrong, and that the proper way to understand the constitution and determinism of the individual is based on an evolutionary view that is predicated on the interaction between organism and environment. On this view, human subjective experience and behavior can be derived from biological factors, environmental factors, or an interaction of the two. This means that human nature cannot (and does not) encompass everything humans experience and do. I designate as human nature only the subjective experiences and behaviors that exist for evolutionary reasons and that are observable in the human species regardless of historical moment or cultural location.

In Chapter 2, I consider a particular group of social constructionists---the Marxist-humanists. According to their argument, the early writings of Karl Marx represent his definitive statement on the “essence of man” upon which they base their humanist philosophy. Some contemporary Marxist-humanists want to define Marx’s conception of the essence of man in terms of human nature. I argue that their appropriation of the term “human nature” is a semantic mystification intended to reconcile Marx with the biological sciences. Marx is much less clear on human nature, and I argue that, even in
his early humanist writings, his conception of human nature is thoroughly social and incompatible with evolutionary theory. The Marxist-humanists attempt to find human nature in biological limitation and human needs, but these conceptions are far too meager to be considered a robust account of human nature. Furthermore, the constituent parts that are supposed to form a human nature are subject to change based on historical process. At this fundamental level, they maintain their fidelity to Marx, but the notion that human nature can be changed in different historical periods make human nature an irrelevant concept. Instead, Marxist-humanists should replace “human nature” with “whatever humans happen to be doing at the time.”

In Chapter 3, I consider the anti-humanism of the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. In opposition to the Marxist-humanists, Althusser believes that the writings of Marx post-1845 are his definitive statement on human nature. Althusser argues that Marx established the science of historical materialism by removing humans from the center of the historical process and instead focusing on the non-human elements of the historical process itself. For example, if one wants to understand human beings, one must understand the mode of production in which human beings labor. Empiricism of the subject entails humanistic blindness to the social forces that construct the subject; therefore, Althusser’s theoretical anti-humanism is necessary to accurately perceive the reality of human existence. While I believe that Althusser has the superior interpretation of Marx, I argue that his theory is inferior to that of evolution. However, his attempt to turn Marxism into a science is commendable. Althusser is concerned with the universal applicability of historical materialism, just as the Marxist-humanists are concerned with
the universalism of human emancipation. I will argue that their universalism, although limited, is an accurate way of perceiving commonalities across the human species, but true universalism can only be understood when applied to human nature in the context of evolutionary history.
CHAPTER 1

BIOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF HUMAN NATURE

If this chapter could be distilled into one single thought, it would be this: who we are is derived from both the genetic information we are born with and the complex interaction between our biological selves and our environments. However, I realize this thought does not have the same intuitive appeal to everyone, especially to those in academia who hold theories about the social construction of human thought and behavior. For this reason, it is important to explore biological factors that contribute to what we think and do, and to understand why this kind of exploration is looked upon with suspicion and incredulity—not only by those who believe in the truth of social construction, but also by some in the biological sciences as well. Consequently, the biological dimension of our human nature will be emphasized more than environmental interaction because it is the biological that is assumed to have no significance. Thus, this chapter might appear to be presupposing biological determinism, but it should not be forgotten that the true presupposition of this chapter is that both biology and environment make us who we are.

The Fact-Value Distinction

On May 16, 1986 in Seville, Spain, an international meeting of scientists was convened by the Spanish National Committee for UNESCO. They produced the Seville
Statement on Violence, a document that refutes the role of biology in determining organized, aggressive human behavior. The document states that it is scientifically incorrect to say that humans have inherited from our ancestors a tendency to make war and that there is no evidence to suggest that aggressive behavior has been selected by evolutionary processes more than any other behavior. And not only is war and aggressive behavior not a product of evolutionary history, but also any type of aggressive behavior is not genetically programmed into our human nature. Humans do not possess “violent brains,” and it is scientifically incorrect to say that war—and, by extension, aggressive behavior—is caused by instinct or any particular motivation.

The Seville Statement on Violence is founded on at least two misapprehensions. First, it fails to make a distinction between the history of scientifically influenced opinions on the implications of the biological aspect of violent and aggressive behavior and the descriptive, value-neutral facts about the biological basis for such behavior. Therefore, the authors of the Seville Statement declare, “we challenge a number of alleged biological findings that have been used, even by some in our disciplines, to justify violence and war” (“The Seville Statement on Violence”). The authors are referring to a moral argument that has been historically made by many who used (and probably still use) biological science to conclude—explicitly or implicitly—that aggression and violence cannot be morally condemned and that some races, ethnic groups, or foreign

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A version of the Seville Statement on Violence can be viewed at UNESCO.org.
societies in general are inferior due to a higher, biologically based propensity to engage in aggressive and violent behaviors.

However, the position the Seville Statement is responding to is anachronistic and is never heard in respectable scientific discourse today. Scientists who study the evolutionary and biological aspects of human nature recognize the failure to make distinctions between facts and value judgments, but accusations that immoral conclusions are drawn from scientific inquiry never fail to be reintroduced by anyone who senses danger in the biological study of human nature. The fact that scientifically based conclusions have been used to perpetrate great evils on humanity is not in question. Scientists are well aware of the dark histories of their profession, but they also understand that many of their predecessors failed to make the fact-value distinction and that repeating such a mistake is neither necessary nor inevitable. Thus, it is frustrating to continually defend the biological study of human nature against the charge that value judgments are inherent in scientific facts. The authors of the Seville Statement think it is important to reject the mistaken thinking of their predecessors, but in doing so, they obstruct scientific inquiry into the biological aspects of human nature by making it seem as though it is impossible to carry out such an investigation without necessarily recapitulating the fact-value conflation.

The second mistaken assumption of the Seville Statement on Violence depends on the misrepresentation of the biological explanation for violence and aggression. Much of the document is focused on warfare and the uniquely organized, coordinated violent behavior of humans. The authors claim “[t]he fact that warfare has changed so radically
over time indicates that it is a product of culture.” This argument coincides with the dominant sentiment of the document that holds biological explanations of violence and aggression in contempt, claiming that it is scientifically inaccurate to say that violence and aggressive behavior have been naturally selected and that aggression is therefore not instinctual. However, this argument rests on the construction of a straw man, the characterization of scientists narrowly defining violent and aggressive behavior as exclusively caused by one’s biology. On the contrary, “[a] growing number of psychologists, neuroscientists and anthropologists have accumulated evidence that understanding many aspects of antisocial behavior, including violence and murder, requires the study of brains, genes and evolution, as well as the societies those factors have wrought” (Jones 512). Thus, if any group is to be seen as narrowly defining the role of biology, it is the authors of the Seville Statement who simultaneously accuse other scientists of explaining violent and aggressive behavior exclusively in biological terms while they themselves seek to eliminate biological factors from the causation of violent and aggressive behavior.

The inclusion of biological factors in explanations of violent and aggressive behavior is essential for an accurate understanding of human nature. Contrary to what the authors of the Seville Statement think about such explanations, environmental factors should not be—and almost never are—neglected in the causation of human behavior. What I argue is that biological factors play an irreducible role in violent and aggressive behavior.

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behavior such that it would be impossible for environmental factors alone to eliminate all expressions of violent and aggressive behavior. Furthermore, because biology plays an essential role in violent and aggressive behavior, such behavior can be accurately classified as an essential constituent of a stable, incorrigible human nature. Keeping in mind the necessity of environmental stimuli for the causation of violent and aggressive behavior, lines of demarcation must be drawn around the prevalence of the biological contribution to such behavior. When this is accomplished, human nature can be defined not only as the totality of universally expressed behaviors, but also as the biological substrate from which those behaviors arise.

Interspecific Continuity

From the beginning, the earth and its inhabitants have continuously experienced the violence of nature. Earthquakes, volcanoes, and tsunamis rip apart the earth’s crust and destroy life indiscriminately. On a planet with a 99.9 percent extinction rate, living organisms have always been engaged in a futile struggle for existence. Scientists believe that, currently, “only about 67% of extant species are secure” (Burns 278). Extinction, although natural and inevitable, is a violent process involving, at the very least, deprivation of the vital resources needed by a species to survive. However, considering the life experience of those species that remain in existence, extinction seems preferable. For the sentient creatures of earth, suffering is the one true certainty; whether from losing in the competition for resources or being eviscerated by a predator, animals suffer for the misfortune of having been born into a natural world that has formed them, for good evolutionary reasons, with the capacity to feel the pain of bodily destruction. While
suffering and violence are not ubiquitously experienced, they are permanent features of
the natural world, and they are fundamental to understanding geological and natural
history.

Humans, as a result of the evolution of high-order consciousness, have managed
to reduce the prevalence of suffering brought on by existence in the natural world.
Depending on one’s origin of birth, it is possible to live an entire life without significant
suffering whatsoever. When considering the success of the human species in this regard,
it is tempting to suppose there is a separation between humanity and nature, that we have
somehow escaped or conquered the natural world that, at one time in our life-history,
subjected us to the same torments we observe among other animal species. But, this
conclusion is a misrecognition of our real place in the natural world, and asserting that
such a separation exists requires one to disregard evolutionary history and theory. As a
species, humans do not exist in a vacuum. We are, indissolubly, a part of an evolutionary
tree of life that genetically links us to primitive animal ancestors. Therefore, we share a
common heritage with these primitive species, transferred over time by means of an
abiding genetic code. The replication and transfer of this code and the expression of its
heritable traits in subsequent generations is, at a macro-level, a stable and deliberate
process that maintains the continuity between progenitor and progeny—hence the logic
of the evolutionary tree of life.⁶

⁶ For more on how the replication of genetic material ensures the transhistorical transfer of genetic
information from generation to generation and primitive species to more highly evolved species, see
In light of the continuity that exists in the process of speciation, it should not be surprising that humans share not only genetic material with primitive species but also the phenotypic and behavioral expressions of that genetic information. Thus, although humans have managed to minimize the effect of the external, destructive power of the natural world, there remain internally the vestiges of a common animal nature that retains certain traits and characteristics that have been necessary, historically, for survival. Aggression, abhorred though it may be by the recently civilized human species, has been for millions of years a prerequisite for life and evolution. In sexual and resource competition, aggression plays a necessary role in these life-preserving activities. The existence of aggression in our own species is uncontroversial. What is controversial—at least, for some of us—is the origin of aggression and, consequently, the violence that often results. Aggression is asserted to be a learned behavior that has nothing to do with our biology. Therefore, it is possible to eliminate aggression and violence from our species as long as the environmental factors that cause such behavior to be learned can be changed. In the context of human evolution, such a view seems hopelessly misguided.

Konrad Lorenz, one of the great 20th century biologists, demonstrates the enduring quality of specific filiation in his eloquent treatise on the nature of aggression. His method is empirical, beginning with his observation of coral fish in their natural habitat. (Whatever theoretical assumptions that ultimately emerge from his work—and from the work of all evolutionary scientists, for that matter—they always rest on an empirical foundation.) He observes the aggressive behavior exhibited when fish from a foreign group enter into an occupied territory. Reactions are automatic. The local fish
confront the foreigners with defensive displays designed by evolution to scare off intruders. For this purpose, coral fish are adorned with bright colors arranged in striking patterns that “[elicit] furious reactions of territorial defense in every fish of the same species—and only of the same species—when the reacting individual is in its own territory; and it proclaims fear-inspiring readiness to fight to the intruder encroaching on foreign ground” (Lorenz 20). Although the biological stimuli might vary, all animal species have their own version of the coral fish “war paint.”

From his observation and interpretation of the behavior of coral fish, at least two pertinent conclusions can be drawn. First, Lorenz notes that aggressive behavior and the defensive behavior it elicits arises in circumstances where intraspecific interaction occurs. A significant portion of his work on aggression is dedicated to explaining the peculiarly intraspecific nature of aggressive behavior. While aggression is exhibited in interspecific interactions with frequent violent consequences, most aggression and violence is directed inward. Lorenz notes that there is not widespread warfare conducted between species beyond ordinary resource-acquisition in the predator-prey relationship. Most aggressive behavior is a result of a competition for resources, and this competition is carried out among the constituents of a particular species group. In the case of coral fish, the “war paint” and the concomitant aggressive movements are characteristics

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7 One might question the relevance of presenting observations about the phenotypic structures and behavioral expressions of non-human animals. After all, what do fish have to do with humans? The significance of these observations can be found in previous paragraphs where I describe the replication and transfer of genetic material. According to evolutionary theory, phenotypic structures, instincts, and behaviors are derived from genetic information, and the more primitive the organism, the more influence genetic information has on their behaviors. This wide gap between primitive fish (or any number of other species) and sophisticated humans make it seem as though there could be no genetic connection at all, but, in fact, connections exist due to the virtual immortality of genetic information through the process of replication.
evolved for the purpose of securing and protecting territory that provides the local inhabitants with vital resources.

Secondly, these aggressive behaviors are primarily a result of the long and immutable process of evolution. Like the war paint that adorns the bodies of coral fish, the aggressive movements that elicit defensive confrontations are heritable traits passed along the generational history of the species. This fact, at the very least, must complicate the notion that the human species is constructed exclusively by the environment. The cause of the defensive behavior in the coral fish is no more “acquired” than the beautiful coloration, and many similar behaviors in humans—those that we might classify as reactive, defensive, or instinctual—are also derived from biological inheritance. True, an environmental stimulus is usually required for the expression of an inherited instinctual behavior, but the idea that behavior is only learned from environmental stimuli is undermined by the existence of particular instincts derived from genetic information.

From the observed continuity of interspecific behavior and the investigation of interspecific genetic similarity, aggressive behavior appears to be a stable and consistent characteristic of all animal species.

The selection of aggressive behavior can occur for multiple reasons. Already mentioned is the advantage taken by organisms that can secure resources by fending off encroachment by members of the same species. Perhaps the most commonsensical reason is the role aggression plays in sexual selection. If the natural order is arranged such that males must compete with other males for reproductive access to a female, then aggression becomes an indispensible characteristic for the accomplishing of this task.
And, if it is the males who display the most aggressive behavior that regularly prevail in the competition for reproductive success, then it will be the genetic material of these more aggressive males that is replicated and transferred to the next generation with higher frequency. If nothing else, aggressive instincts will be ensured a permanent place in proceeding generations, and depending on where in evolutionary history aggression begins to be measured, it would be more likely that this instinct would increase rather than diminish.

Lorenz offers a third possibility for the selection of aggression and its affiliated characteristics—the conflict between the aggressive and escape drives.

Of these movements, the so-called broadside display has developed into a special rite which primarily arose through a fear-motivated turning away from the opponent, and a simultaneous escape-motivated spreading of the vertical fins. These movements have the result of presenting, to the adversary, the largest possible contours of the fish, making it appear bigger and more fear-inspiring. This desirable effect exerted a selection pressure which, in very many groups of fish, caused the evolution of exaggerated threat gestures in which expanded fins are displayed broadside-on. It is in the service of this broadside display that, in cichlids, in the Siamese fighting fish, and many others, the vertical fins have attained the beautiful development of size, form, and color which have made these fish so popular with aquarists. (Lorenz 112)

What we learn from Lorenz here is that aggression need not exist a priori in the instinctual behavior of an organism; from the most basic drive to flee in fear, a defense
against the fear reaction can begin to form. This is yet another wonderfully paradoxical event provided by the process of evolution. Lorenz delights in such anomalies, ironically commenting that it is thanks to the selection of aggression that we can enjoy the phenotypic characteristics of these fish.

However, lest we begin to assume that aggression is unproblematic, Lorenz turns to the existence of collective violence in intraspecific conflicts that arise from aggressive instincts. He notes the colony affiliation of insects like bees and ants that leads to intraspecific violence when a member of one colony intrudes on another. These insects recognize members of their own beehive or anthill by smell, and when researchers mix two colonies, the result is a massacre (Lorenz 157). The same behavior can be observed among rats which also distinguish members of a pack by smell. When an outside rat trespasses into territory of a rat pack, the pack will collectively attack and kill it. Even a rat that has been removed from the pack and covered in the scent of a foreign pack will be subject to these collective attacks on return. Rats have even been observed ignoring an intruder initially as if to diminish any potential fear, and then without warning, an attack begins in which the entire pack participates. The same type of collective action predicated on aggressive behavior can be observed when wild geese from two flocks are put together on a single island. Both flocks take up military formations and proceed to fight as a collective (Lorenz 189).

As a species that is linked to this evolutionary heritage of aggression and collective violence, humans also carry the predisposition for this type of behavioral expression. Any number of traits can contribute to the tendency toward collective
violence, including “aggression, risk taking, male bonding, in-group altruism, out-group xenophobia, dominance and subordination, and territoriality, all of which are encoded in the human genome” (Pitman 352). However, a genetic predisposition for aggression or collective violence does not mean humans are predetermined to act violently or aggressively. Biological explanations for aggression and violence are only intended to be part of the reason why aggressive and violent behavior is expressed. The theoretical conflict is between those who want to remove biology entirely from the explanation and those who favor a more balanced approach. As Russil Durrant has aptly written, “nature/culture dichotomies are unlikely to prove fruitful and . . . we can advance our understanding of collective violence by adopting an evolutionary perspective that takes into account the cultural nature of our species and that integrates more distal explanations (in terms of evolutionary history, function, and cultural evolution) with more proximate developmental, social, and psychological explanations” (Durrant 428). Theorizing the biological contribution to aggressive and violent behavior does not preclude social, cultural, political, economical, or psychological explanations; it is merely an attempt to situate biological factors among non-biological factors for a more comprehensive explanation of human behavior.

For Lorenz, no simple explanation of aggression and violence will suffice. His project is primarily focused on the biological and evolutionary factors that contribute to such behavior, but even in this regard, he maintains a complex view of instincts in conflict (what he calls the Great Parliament of Instincts). Nor does he fail to make the fact-value distinction by positing normative statements about the evolutionary process
and its consequences. However, he does lament the results of the evolutionary process by labeling as “evil” the tendency toward collective violence that has brought unfathomable suffering on the human species. He refers to “stupid blind alley[s] of evolution” into which members of a species drive themselves by means of “demented competition,” and he speculates that “the group hate between rat clans is really a diabolical invention which serves no purpose” (163). These comments should be enough to dispel any notion that Lorenz, as a scientist and a believer in the biological and evolutionary influence on human behavior, thinks that somehow the process of evolution works toward the perfection of the natural world or its organic inhabitants. His veneration for evolution is a matter of his experience of the sublime in that process, not of any teleological, quasi-religious function that process might be imagined to fulfill.8

Sexual Dimorphism

Aggressive instincts and the behaviors that are expressed as a result differ depending on one’s sex. The significance I wish to draw from this fact is that such a difference supports the claim that human nature, to some degree, is constituted by biological factors that have been shaped by the process of evolution through natural selection. Sex—or, more specifically, sexual dimorphism—plays an important role in this claim because it is one of the most basic and universal characteristics found in the natural world, and its legacy precedes the emergence of the human species by many millions of years.

8 This holds true for any scientist who has been properly educated in the theory of evolution or any other matter in which “scientific progress” happens to be the topic of discussion.
Aggressive behavior is one of the most common differences between males and females throughout the animal kingdom. In humans, ten times as many males are convicted of violent crimes than are females; until recently, military combat units were composed entirely of males; and school boys at every age initiate many more physical assaults than girls do. Boys are physically and verbally more aggressive than girls, and express their aggression in their play, fantasies, and in their aggressive sports. (Pitman 360-1)

No doubt, non-biological factors contribute to the reasons for all of these behaviors. Unlike the social constructionist, it is not the goal of the evolutionary biologist or psychologist to recapitulate a one-dimensional explanation for behaviors correlated with biological sex. However, there are biological factors involved in aggressive behaviors, and they can be brought into focus by comparing the prevalence of aggression in males and females.⁹

Females have aggressive instincts, just as males do, but they are far less likely to carry out aggressive behavior—at least, outside the bounds of an intimate relationship. If females display less aggressive behavior, there must be an evolutionary reason for it. Cross and Campbell suggest that fear plays a role as an adaptive mechanism that reduces exposure to physical danger, and that this provided a selection advantage for females who are less capable, due to physical makeup, of ensuring their survival (390). Also, the

⁹ Although many social constructionists would like to have sex distinctions erased from our minds, the distinction remains apparent to just about all of us, and the fact that the argument of sexual neutrality fails to convince other animal species is more than an idle rumination. Of course, this statement will only have significance for those who accept the evolutionary logic of sexual dimorphism, but I include it anyway because, in the grand scheme of evolution, the notion that sexual dimorphism could ever cease to have psychological significance for species that achieve high-level cognition seems rather silly.
female animal has more to lose if she is killed because the chances that her offspring will survive are severely diminished. This interpretation is in line with Lorenz’s “parliament of instincts”—fear and aggression conflict within the organism to bring about a behavioral response to an environmental stimulus. Thus, the greater the fear instinct, the less likely the aggressive instinct will motivate aggressive behavior.

And yet, females are still often observed to carry out aggressive behavior. Cross and Campbell argue that this is due in part to the hormone oxytocin “which reduces stress responses to biologically necessary encroachments on women's bodies” (390). Research often focuses on the use of oxytocin to increase trust and affection within romantic and familial relationships, but oxytocin has more than one role. As a hormone that decreases fear responses, it can allow a mother to protect her offspring by removing an inhibition on her aggressive instincts. In humans, the effect of oxytocin is complicated by other non-biological factors, especially within the romantic relationship. While the hormone aids in pair bonding, it can also facilitate an aggressive confrontation in response to extra-specific factors. Cross and Campbell are careful to say that they do not want to diminish the importance of such factors like jealousy in these confrontations. But, when these environmental factors are present, oxytocin can perform its second function of reducing fear of that kind of confrontation.

Another biological factor in the enhancement of aggressive behavior is the neurotransmitter serotonin, a modulator of action for other brain chemicals.

A variety of violent, impulsive behaviors has been associated with low levels of serotonin as measured through prolactin levels. Serotonin, however, does not
covary with testosterone. Testosterone is thought to be more strongly correlated with outward-directed aggressiveness and lack of socialization than it is with impulsiveness, whereas serotonin is hypothesized to be related to impulsive aggression. (McKenry, Julian, and Gavazzi 309)

The purpose of focusing on these biological elements is to demonstrate the biological contribution to aggressive behavior and, by extension, the biological substrate that I want to categorize as partially constituting human nature. Oxytocin and serotonin do not cause the behavior; they are implicated in the enhancement of aggressive feelings in general, and whatever action results from the particular state of enhanced aggressive feelings, we can say with certainty that these biological elements played a part in the outcome. In summary, it is appropriate to include such hormones and neurotransmitters—as well as their effects—in the category of the biological composition of human nature.

We can also observe the difference in aggressive behavior for each sex in the development of young children. Consider the prevalence of “rough and tumble” play among young boys, “playing ‘ramming’ games of deliberately running into one another, play wrestling, mock fighting, putting clay in one another's hair, chasing one another around while making machine gun sounds, shooting one another and falling dead, pushing back and forth, convulsing with laughter in the bliss of pretending to make toy horses sneeze and fall down…, etc” (Eme 352). These activities provide important exercise for the young boys, and it gives them the opportunity to express aggressive
behavior in a relatively safe manner. This type of play is observable in non-human species such as primates, and these behaviors are important for “the practice and perfection of complex and fast-paced species-typical motor skills useful in predator avoidance and species specific fighting as well as preparation for the formation of adult coalitions which engage in group hunting and group warfare” (352). While predator avoidance is less relevant to the young human male, this play remains a part of human behavior because its presence in the genome is far more stable than the environment in which the human species currently exists.

By a few years of age, boys and girls have segregated themselves into same-sex peer groups with boys predominately engaged in rough and tumble play. Again, this segregation and play is observable in young primates. One significant biological factor in these differing behaviors is the level of testosterone in males. Although both male and female fetuses are exposed to androgens, estrogens, and progestins, males are exposed to significantly more testosterone than females (Eme 352). Several research studies have been done on this topic, and they have concluded that “the organizational effects of this early sex difference in testosterone contribute to the substantial sex differences in toy play, rough and tumble play and direct physical aggression” (352). This is not to suggest that testosterone levels—or any other biological factor—are the exclusive cause of these behaviors.

10 It might be worth commenting here that aggression does not necessarily entail animosity. Young boys can play ramming games without hating the one with whom they are colliding. On the contrary, young boys (and older ones, too) engage in such behavior because it is enjoyable to do so. And, while these games might very well lead to animosity due to a perceived injustice done during the game, the whole thing begins innocently enough. Perhaps the rough and tumble play is a manifestation of Lorenz’s theory of redirection, the process by which aggressive instincts are indulged in a safe situation so as to avoid a potentially dangerous one. If this is true, boys—young and old—should be encouraged to engage in rough and tumble play frequently.
playfully aggressive behaviors in males. However, given that these biological factors provide a substantial motivation for such behaviors, it would be impractical to assume that such behavior could be eradicated with the removal of any particular environmental stimulus.¹¹

This is not the view of most in the social sciences and humanities where social construction is the only acceptable position, both morally and rationally. However, there are examples of natural scientists also arguing the social constructionist position. Biologist Ann Fausto-Sterling contends that “labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender, not science, can define our sex” (Sexing the Body 3). She believes that scholars create truths about sexuality through political and social struggles, and biologists in particular contribute to this construction by conducting research that is intrinsically political and passing it off as objective and authoritative. She claims that “scientists do not simply read nature to find truths to apply in the social world. Instead, they use truths taken from our social relationships to structure, read, and interpret the natural” (115-6). Insofar as scientists are influenced by their environments when making decisions about the direction of their research, Fausto-Sterling is correct to point out these non-scientific factors that go into the production of research.

But, her critique goes far beyond merely alerting us to this influence; she wants to argue that scientific discovery—at least where biological sex is concerned—is

¹¹ If anyone doubts this fact, they can try to keep young boys from rough-and-tumble play by giving them a book to read or a song to sing for the purpose of encouraging alternative, non-aggressive behavior. When encouragement in very little time gives way to coercion, perhaps one will come to a different conclusion about the incorrigible nature of young boys.
exclusively a reflection of the scientist’s personal biases and political motivations, not any kind of objective correspondence to human-independent reality. Furthermore, the scientist’s social construction has a far more pervasive effect than even the social constructionists realize. The “truth” scientists produce about human sexuality is “embodied and incorporated into our very physiological being” (5) so that biology itself is refashioned. “As we grow and develop we literally—not just discursively; that is, through language and cultural practices—construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh” (20). In certain ways, this claim is true. Fausto-Sterling dedicates much of her book to horrors of sex reassignment surgeries that go terribly wrong and intersexual individuals who, later in life, reject the sex that was arbitrarily assigned to them based on ill-defined criteria. But when considered in the larger context of sexual dimorphism that results in differences between males and females, the notion that a society at any particular historical moment can reshape human biology seems not only impossible but also counter-intuitive.¹²

One of Fausto-Sterling’s main concerns is how biologists think about the internal body and assign it a sex independent of anatomical structures. Biologists do this “by defining as sex hormones what are, in effect, multi-site chemical growth regulators thus rendering their far reaching, non-sexual roles in both male and female development nearly invisible” (Sexing the Body 147). According to this logic, any time an evolutionary biologist links what is known as a “sex hormone” to some behavior that is considered to

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¹² I suspect Fausto-Sterling would begrudgingly agree with this assessment, hence the interchangeable use in her text of the terms “physiology” and “biology,” the former being more amenable to change than the latter.
be “masculine,” the biologist is automatically and incorrectly categorizing that sex hormone in a faulty male-female binary. For example, according to a comprehensive literature review of research on testosterone, a majority of studies demonstrate that “high testosterone levels tend to covary with high probability of aggressive behaviors, dominance status, and pathologic forms of aggression . . . especially with antisocial populations” (McKenry, Julian, and Gavazzi 309). Because testosterone exists in males at much higher levels than in females, biologists make a link between testosterone and “maleness.” It is this link that Fausto-Sterling opposes.

While paying proper respect to the research that has been done on hormones and their functions, Fausto-Sterling thinks it is time to drop the sexist terminology of “androgen” and “estrogen.” She correctly points out that

our bodies make several dozen different but closely related chemically intraconvertable molecules belonging to the chemical group we call steroids. Often, these molecules reach their destination via the circulatory system, but sometimes cells make them right at the site of use. Hence, it is usually appropriate to call them ‘hormones’ given that the definition of a hormone is a substance that travels through the bloodstream to interact with an organ some distance from its place of origin. So for starters, let’s agree to call them steroid hormones and nothing else. (Fausto-Sterling, Sexing the Body193)

Fausto-Sterling wants to rename the sex hormones so that we no longer think of them as having sex-specific roles, at least at the cellular level. She admits that these hormones do have different anatomical and behavioral effects on “conventional” males and females;
her main concern is how these hormones are conceptualized. Hormones can best be thought of as “govern[ing] the processes of cell growth, cell differentiation, cell physiology, and program[ing] cell death. They are, in short, powerful growth hormones affecting most, if not all, the bodies organ systems” (193).  

Insofar as the renaming is limited to cellular activity, Fausto-Sterling’s proposal appears to be non-contentious, but only if we ignore the larger point she is making about the science of sexual differentiation. In speaking of her fellow scientists, she favors a straw man argument (one that is often used by humanities scholars). She characterizes her opposition as believing that the body is a “naturally determined object existing outside of politics, culture, and social change” (Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex” 1495). By “existing outside of,” she is not referring to a literal outside existence but to imperviousness to the influence of non-biological factors. When speaking of her own field of biology, she says,  

[t]he field of biology itself is riddled with static, dictatorial visions of the organism. From the view that behavior is determined primarily via the central nervous system in isolation from its environment (and in the case of gender differences mediated by directorial hormones) to scientific accounts of DNA itself as containing the meaning and essence of life. (Fausto-Sterling, “Building Two-Way Streets” 338)  

\[13\] As long as we are speaking of hormones at the cellular level, renaming them does not seem controversial at all. However, one gets the distinct impression that, even though these “unsexed” hormones have become undifferentiated at the cellular level, Fausto-Sterling would still like to apply this logic at the anatomical and behavioral levels as well. Is it a coincidence that she includes the sexing of hormones and sex reassignment surgeries in the same book? At the very least, she seems to be blurring the boundaries between the cellular, the anatomical, and the behavioral.
I do not doubt that we could find many scientists who actually believe that environmentally isolated biology determines development and behavior, just as there are many humanities scholars who believe the reverse of this radical argument. However, what some scientists erroneously believe to be the case about the primacy of biology does not change the scientific fact that humans develop according to a complex relationship between biology and environment. Fausto-Sterling wants to claim the high-ground for herself. In speaking to her feminist cohorts, she says that “feminists must accept the body as simultaneously composed of genes, hormones, cells, and organs—all of which influence health and behavior—and of culture and history” (Fausto-Sterling, “The Bare Bones of Sex” 1495). So, Fausto-Sterling will claim that both biology and environment play a role in the development of the body, but for some reason, she denies the same belief to scientists based on how they choose to classify hormones.

As the most popular evolutionary psychologist currently writing, Steven Pinker would be the first to oppose Fausto-Sterling’s straw man argument. However, he is critical of the claims Fausto-Sterling makes about sex and gender. According to her gender construction theory, “[t]he key biological fact is that boys and girls have different genitalia, and it is this biological difference that leads adults to interact differently with different babies whom we conveniently color-code in pink or blue to make it unnecessary to go peering into their diapers for information about gender” (qtd. in Pinker, The Blank Slate 346). Pinker gives numerous responses to the claim that gender is constructed, but I will limit myself to a few. One of his responses is that the behaviors of males and females
are exactly what an evolutionary biologist would have predicted with only anatomical information. For example,

[t]hroughout the animal kingdom, when the female has to invest more calories and risk in each offspring (in the case of mammals, through pregnancy and nursing), she also invests more in nurturing the offspring after birth, since it is more costly for a female to replace a child than for a male to replace one. The difference in investment is accompanied by a greater competition among males over opportunities to mate, since mating with many partners is more likely to multiply the number of offspring of a male than the number of offspring of a female. (Pinker, *The Blank Slate* 346)

As a result of the need to compete with other males for reproductive success, males have larger bodies than females and possess a higher capacity for aggressive behaviors, both of which are necessary for reproductive success. Of course, this does not mean that human males compete for human females in the same way that other animals do, but the general pattern of competition is the same. As always, instincts, dispositions, and behaviors that have been selected for throughout evolutionary history are more durable than any particular historical moment or cultural location can eradicate; and while it is not inconceivable that such instincts, behaviors, and dispositions could eventually be selected against based on prolonged environmental continuity, we still have millions of years to go in our evolutionary history before this biological state of existence could be actualized.
Testosterone levels also contribute to gender differences since higher levels of testosterone “correlates with libido, self-confidence, and the drive for dominance” (Pinker, *The Blank Slate* 347). The causal relationship is complicated by the fact that concentration of testosterone in the bloodstream does not determine these effects. The effect depends on the number of receptors available for the molecule, and psychological states can also play a determining role, but the relationship exists nonetheless. Of course, testosterone also exists in women, high levels of which correlate with women who “smile less often and have more extramarital affairs, a stronger social presence, and even a stronger handshake” (*The Blank Slate* 348). Fausto-Sterling would applaud the statement that testosterone exists in both males and females, taking it as proof that there is no sex difference to be discovered here. Androgens, too, are found in females, and Pinker notes that

Girls with congenital adrenal hyperplasia overproduce androstenedione, the androgen hormone made famous by the baseball slugger Mark McGwire. Though their hormone levels are brought to normal soon after birth, the girls grow into tomboys, with more rough-and-tumble play, a greater interest in trucks than dolls, better spatial abilities, and, when they get older, more sexual fantasies and attractions involving other girls. Those who are treated with hormones only later in childhood show male patterns of sexuality when they become young adults, including quick arousal by pornographic images, an autonomous sex drive centered on genital stimulation, and the equivalent of wet dreams. (348)
Significant in this passage is the effect that increased androgen production has on behavior. In one sense, Fausto-Sterling would approve of the revelation that androgens can affect females just as much as males. However, these effects are only observable at the level of the individual. When extrapolating the effect androgen levels have on females in total, a clear sex difference begins to emerge.

Statistically speaking, males are more likely to be affected by these hormones (which we are no longer calling “sex hormones”), and, based on the behaviors that result from androgen effects, gendered behavior begins to emerge. If sex, in general, determines the frequency of effect that androgens have on the body, and if one sex, in general, displays these effects most frequently and consistently, then there is logical ground to claim that gender, defined as a determinate set of behaviors correlated with a particular sex, is an objective category into which human individuals can be placed. True, a male gender category will include females because the factors that determine gender—including biology and environment—can affect individual females just as much as individual males. But when viewing the total number of individuals that constitute the gender category, males will compose the majority, and thus the designation of “male gender” is an appropriate appellation.

What I am arguing for is the existence of gender categories based on statistical expression of behaviors correlated with hormones and anatomical sex, and in the pure world of statistics, perhaps this would be an uncontroversial argument. But,

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unfortunately, in the world of very real sex and gender discrimination, arguments for categorizing sex and gender are not viewed favorably, at least not by those whose world-view is not significantly informed by biological and evolutionary science. The goal of these politically motivated persons is “to interrupt the social reproduction of male power” by destroying “not only androcentrism and biological essentialism but also gender polarization and compulsory heterosexuality” (Bem 329). Their modus operandi is “to sever all the culturally-constructed connections that currently exist in our society between what sex a person is and virtually every other aspect of human experience” (329). As we have already seen, the sex a person is plays an important role in who they are beyond the mechanics of reproduction. But, the scientific facts are irrelevant to the gender construction argument. What is truly at stake for biological anti-essentialists are the doxastic attitudes that people have regarding biological sex. They want a “psychological revolution [that] would have us all begin to view the biological fact of being male or female in much the same way that we now view the biological fact of being human” (329). Such a revolution presupposes, falsely, that biology plays virtually no role in creating identities, and thus sex is a triviality that could, in theory, cease to register psychologically as a real human distinction.

Not only does it seem implausible that distinctions based on biological sex would ever cease to be made at an innate psychological level, it also seems implausible that one could ever cease to make the distinction about one’s own body. And, if the distinction cannot be erased from one’s own subjective reflection, how could it ever be erased from objective observation? Pinker provides an interesting hypothetical experiment that
addresses this problem. He invites us to imagine that a baby boy is given a sex change operation and is then raised by his parents as if he were a girl. If gender really is socially constructed and is not influenced by biology, then we would expect that the boy would have the mind of a normal girl and not like a boy trapped in a girl’s body. In fact, such cases do exist as a result of diseases and accidents.

One study looked at twenty-five boys who were born without a penis (a birth defect known as cloacal extrophy) and who were then castrated and raised as girls. All of them showed male patterns of rough-and-tumble play and had typically male attitudes and interests. More than half of them spontaneously declared they were boys, one when he was just five years old. (The Blank Slate 349)

In light of such cases, absolute gender construction seems to become untenable.

Environment certainly plays an important role in the permutations of gendered behavior. There is nothing necessary about young girls displaying maternal behavior toward a doll—it is logically possible that in a particular community, dolls do not exist, and so that very specific behavior is not expressed. But, what does seem to be necessary—from an evolutionary point of view—is behavior that indicates a predisposition for maternity, assuming that the girls in question reside within the statistical gender category of female previously established.

In opposing absolute gender construction, perhaps our greatest ally is Fausto-Sterling herself, although she might not realize it. The most compelling parts of her book deal with the unfortunate history of sex reassignment surgeries performed on infants born
with ambiguous genitalia and other related anatomical malformations. If absolute gender construction was the law of gender formation, then sex reassignment surgeries would be of no consequence. Pinker’s hypothetical experiment could be practiced with impunity, and the results would always be positive. But, in reality, the results are horrendous. Despite the genitalia the doctors arbitrarily decide to fashion for the infant and the consequent socialization that ensues based on this decision, as many of these persons develop through childhood into adulthood they experience alienation from their own bodies, feeling as though, physiologically and psychologically, they are not who they should be.\textsuperscript{15} Although Fausto-Sterling believes that people should be able to choose their gender, she also must admit that “the body does emit signals through the course of one’s sexual development, and this is why the radical surgeries and hormone therapies have caused suffering for intersexals” (Liesen 95). On this issue, Fausto-Sterling’s feminist persuasion takes over, and so she focuses on what intersexals (and everyone else) should be able to do. But as a biologist, she does not seem to give proper attention to the question of if it is even possible to choose one’s gender.\textsuperscript{16}

Furthermore, Fausto-Sterling’s category of “intersexual” is far more expansive than what it should be due to the fact that she includes persons who are unambiguously male or female at the anatomical level.

Anne Fausto-Sterling's suggestion that the prevalence of intersex might be as high as 1.7\% has attracted wide attention in both the scholarly press and the popular

\textsuperscript{15} Of course, these horrendous results also include the mutilation of functional genitalia, and by focusing specifically on sex and gender confusion, I do not mean to lessen the significance of anatomical trauma.\textsuperscript{16} In choosing between the “is” or the “ought,” Fausto-Sterling seems most dedicated to the “ought”—and, insofar as “ought” implies “can,” the feminist Fausto-Sterling and the biologist Fausto-Sterling have a serious conflict to resolve.
media. Many reviewers are not aware that this figure includes conditions which most clinicians do not recognize as intersex, such as Klinefelter syndrome, Turner syndrome, and late-onset adrenal hyperplasia. If the term intersex is to retain any meaning, the term should be restricted to those conditions in which chromosomal sex is inconsistent with phenotypic sex, or in which the phenotype is not classifiable as either male or female. Applying this more precise definition, the true prevalence of intersex is seen to be about 0.018%, almost 100 times lower than Fausto-Sterling's estimate of 1.7%. (Sax 174)

For example, Fausto-Sterling would categorize men with an extra Y chromosome or a woman with an extra X chromosome as “intersexual” even though there is no anatomical ambiguity about their sex. Phenotypic expressions of these chromosomal abnormalities include lower than average intelligence and social behavior problems, but these individuals remain fertile, and sex or gender confusion is not an issue for them. If Fausto-Sterling is relying on statistics to make the case that sexual dimorphism is a constructed rather than a natural category, the miniscule proportions of the corrected intersex numbers do not favor her argument.

However, we can imagine that, because Fausto-Sterling is highly motivated by identity politics, she would respond that the existence of only one true intersexual would be enough to invalidate the logic of sexual dimorphism.° She is primarily concerned with the distinction between normal and abnormal, distinctions she apparently believes are unnatural and subject to reconstruction. I say “apparently” because this is a conclusion

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17 Although I do not mention it here, I will later provide an argument in Chapter 3 in which I demonstrate that, in general, such exceptions do not necessarily invalidate the universalism of a rule, law, theory, etc.
that is implicit in her argument. As a biologist, Fausto-Sterling would no doubt be able to provide evidence that she is not a constructionist in the radical, absolutist sense. And yet, she seems to give little credence to the role sexual dimorphism plays in the perpetuation of the natural world. If all she wants is to add a minute third category of sexual orientation to the list, this would be perfectly acceptable, but adding that third category does not *ipso facto* make sexual dimorphism unnatural. Nor does it make the distinction between normal and abnormal unnatural because what determines normality in nature is the functionality of the phenomena in question.

In theorizing the existence of the pathological, Lorenz defines the normal as those structures and functions of the organism that “are the ones which, under selection pressure of their survival value, have evolved in this and in no other form” (Lorenz 194). Missing from this definition are the various phenotypic derivations that exist through random chance, mutation, or environmental interference. But, if observed as a statistical whole, there emerges at least a broad definition of what could be considered normal in the sense that it has been selected for good evolutionary reasons. For example, we can characterize a human hand that is missing an opposable thumb as abnormal because opposable thumbs have clearly been selected for, and the lack of an opposable thumb, under the conditions in which it was first evolved, would work against the survival of the organism. Lorenz recognizes that ideal types are rarely found in nature, but he is probably being too modest in saying so. At a certain level of observation, all matter tends to dissolve into chaos, and looking at any two opposable thumbs at a sufficient level of particularity will inevitably reveal a disjunction between the tokens of the type we seek to
discover. However, as long as we keep our observation of organic structure at a suitable level of generality, and as long as we are focusing on the most important and basic functions these organic structures perform, we should be able to identify ideal types of almost any organic structure that has been placed under selection pressure.

What does this mean for true intersexuals with ambiguous genitalia? Insofar as their genitalia would hinder their chances for survival if placed under perfect selection conditions, we can categorize intersexuals as possessing abnormal, anatomical structures. I say “perfect selection conditions” because there are other factors that can account for the persistence of intersexuality in the human species, such as genetic mutations and environmental factors that increase the chances that intersexuals will be able to reproduce. Evolution is not a teleological process by which the human species slowly moves toward “perfection,” whatever that term might mean. The replication of genetic material through the reproduction of organic beings is a messy process that seems to be moving in erratic directions rather than in a linear trajectory. Perhaps with this view of evolution in mind, we can set aside our fears that the label of “abnormal” will lead to unethical social practices; nor does that term need to inspire psychological anguish or feelings of inadequacy. The abnormal is a fact of nature that does not entail any value judgments. All such judgments are applied in response to the natural facts, and in this sense, Fausto-Sterling’s constructionist solutions are justified. But, we should not lose sight of the fact that the primary reason why inappropriate value judgments are made

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18 Notice that I do not refer to intersexuals as being abnormal but only particular anatomical structures that the intersexual possesses. This distinction is important for maintaining distance from the unfortunate history of eugenicist rhetoric.
about persons possessing abnormal organic structures is because many people still do not understand that biological facts of nature do not entail judgments of value.\(^\text{19}\)

In summary, humans possess certain phenotypic traits, and we manifest certain behaviors that are partially, if not completely, derived from the evolutionary process of genetic replication and transfer. Because these traits and behaviors are a product of the long process of evolution, and because they are displayed universally across the human species, we can outline the structure of a stable, durable human nature. In doing so, I am not positing biological determinism but, rather, biological essentialism. The subjective experience of aggression is a result of the evolutionary selection for aggression, and this experience is a universal aspect of the human species. Aggressive behavior is sometimes the result of the subjective experience of aggression, but there is nothing necessary about this result, and as animal species develop high-level cognition, the instances of aggressive behavior seem to decrease.\(^\text{20}\) Therefore, because the subjective experience of aggression is transhistorical and transcultural, the subjective experience of aggression is biologically essential in the sense that it is always present. Aggressive behaviors can, but do not have to, result from the subjective experience of aggression—thus, there is nothing essential about aggressive behavior. However, there is always the potential for aggressive behavior to result from the subjective experience of aggression; therefore, it is appropriate to label

\(^\text{19}\) When I say “judgments of value” I am referring specifically to the moralistic variety that is applied to persons qua persons. It is true that an evolutionary scientist, in theorizing about natural selection, will make a judgment about which phenotypes would be more or less advantageous for an organism’s survival chances, and in this sense the structure in question could be assigned a value. However, the value is restricted to the phenotype itself, whereas the value judgments I am referring to are applied to the entire organism.

aggressive behaviors as part of human nature even though there is nothing necessary or
deterministic about these behaviors.  

The same logic applies to sexual dimorphism and the sex specific, subjective
experiences and consequent behaviors that derive from evolutionary history and natural
selection. Because maternal instincts, under normal conditions, are a universal, subjective
experience of human females, this experience is biologically essential in that it is present
transhistorically and transculturally. Therefore, we can classify the subjective experience
of maternal instincts and the behaviors that often result from this experience as a part of
human nature. However, this does not mean that all female humans are determined to be
maternal. One reason for the lack of a significant subjective disposition toward maternity
could be due to a malfunction at the genetic level so that there is no impulse to have or
care for offspring. Another reason could be environmental circumstances that are
powerful enough to override these instincts, typically in traumatic ways. Or, perhaps the
woman makes a rational choice to not reproduce for non-biological reasons. In all of
these cases, biological predispositions are contributing to the outcome, but women in
these circumstances can still make a choice. The biological dimension of their being does
not make them do anything—it only influences both the decision and the consequences of
that decision.

21 Furthermore, we can say that aggressive behavior is part of human nature while at the same time
condemning every immoral action that results from aggressive behavior. In this way, we avoid the
naturalistic fallacy and yet maintain a factually true conception of human nature.
A Comprehensive Method Proposed

If I seem to be placing too much emphasis on the biological dimension of human nature, this is only because it is the biological that is most often neglected (outside of the natural sciences). I would like to conclude by establishing a more global perspective on the causes of both subjective experiences and human behaviors. These phenomena are results “of interactions among cultural, economic, political, organizational, life-experience, biological, behavioral, and social factors” (Johnson 3), and depending on the situation, these factors will vary in their degree of influence. Russil Durrant and Tony Ward provide a thorough formulation for what a comprehensive perspective might look like. First, they categorize the different types of explanations for traits and characteristics—adaptation and evolutionary function, phylogeny or evolutionary history, developmental processes, and proximate mechanisms (Durrant and Ward 367). These categories rely on distal explanations that are “related to the evolutionary history of the trait and its function in advancing reproductive success” and proximate explanations that are “concerned with how the trait developed and the physiological mechanisms that underpin its expression” (367). Included in the distal category are the “cultural-historical” explanations “that draw on the transmission of specific beliefs, values, and practices within and among cultural groups and which persist over time” (367).

The type of explanation to be used depends on what we want to understand. For example, if we want to understand why intrasexual violence is more common among men than women transhistorically and transculturally, then analysis at the evolutionary level can give us the best explanation—e.g., intrasexual violence is disproportional “because
differences in parental investment have exerted stronger selection pressures on males to compete with one another for status and resources” (Durrant and Ward 368). However, when comparing intrasexual violence from one community with another, cultural and historical analyses are more relevant because evolutionary analysis is less capable of making distinctions between communities. Historical and cultural explanations can reveal “social environments which offer few opportunities for success through legitimate means and which have little in the way of either informal or formal control mechanisms” (368). Under these circumstances, particular communities might “create contexts in which violence becomes an important avenue to obtain respect and status, and in these communities there may be culturally transmitted beliefs about the normative use of violence in these particular contexts” (368). Explinations along these lines should be amenable to those who favor theories of social construction, but the theoretical system breaks down if the historical and cultural analysis is used to explain phenomena that require an evolutionary explanation.

As the phenomena we want to explain move toward higher levels of atomism, our analysis must become more individualized. In order to explain the difference between males in the same community, we must use psychological and developmental theories—e.g., “individuals exposed to high rates of family, peer and community violence will develop a suite of values, norms, beliefs and scripts that facilitate violent behavior with individual differences in personality characteristics emerging from a complex interaction between genetic and environmental factors” (Durrant and Ward 368). This level of analysis covers the life-history of individuals, the development of unique subjectivities,
and the individually specific environmental factors that contribute to individual behavior. And, at the final and most particular level of analysis, we have situational explanations that consider the immediate circumstances that influence individual actions—e.g., the “frustration, rejection, and provocation [that] increase the likelihood of violence, particularly when other environmental factors (heat, guns, alcohol) are present” (368). Three of the four levels of analysis could be described as mostly focusing on environmental factors that shape human beings. However, it should not be forgotten that the picture of human nature that emerges from the evolutionary level of analysis permeates all of the other levels to which more construction-friendly explanations are applied. In summary, it is impossible to fully understand human nature, human action, or human societies if biological and environmental factors are separated.
CHAPTER 2

MARX, MARXISM, AND HUMANISM

All history is nothing but a continuous transformation of human nature.

—Marx, *Poverty of Philosophy* 125

By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he [man] at the same time changes his own nature.

—Marx, *Capital* 1:177

Let me begin with a deceptively provocative statement: Marx did not believe in human nature—that is, a nature shaped by biological factors and formed over millions of years of evolutionary history. I do not mean to say Marx did not believe in evolution; he certainly did, as is well documented in Paul Heyer’s *Nature, Human Nature, and Society*. One can believe in the process of evolution as an explanation for human existence and yet omit, or even deny, the influence evolution exerts on human characteristics, drives, and behavior. Ambiguity on this point abounds in Marx’s writings. Even in his most humanistic of works—the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*—it is not clear if Marx is denying a transtional, biologically influenced human nature. What is clear is that he believes it is inconsequential to human life, and he consistently proves this point by focusing his attention on the importance of subject-object relations for the creative and productive life-activity of human beings, the only truly essential quality
humans possess. For Marx, what makes us who we are is our ability to create ourselves through self-conscious life-activity (labor), a capacity that distinguishes the human species from all other animals. A discussion about what motivates this life-activity, however, is regrettably absent.

So, my opening statement is deceptively provocative because human nature for Marx seems to be something other than how the concept is now defined. Human nature is currently associated with internal biological states of being, whereas Marx uses the term to refer to what humans do externally in relation to the objective world. Why, then, is our statement provocative to begin with? Only because there is a group of theorists who argue that Marx believed in a human nature that is something more than a socially constructed phenomenon. Some, like Sean Sayers and Curt Tausky, argue that the fundamental need humans have for productive life-activity can constitute a stable human nature in itself. Others, like Norman Geras and Howard Kaye, go further in arguing that Marx believed in some kind of human nature that is transhistorical, mostly based on Marx’s silence on this point. For example, Kaye thinks there must be an essential human nature because, without it, the concept of alienation would not make sense; there must be some enduring sense of self for which humans can feel loss when it is taken from them. Geras, in the same way, argues that the absence of an explicit statement from Marx about a transhistorical human nature does not prove the contrary.

In all these cases, we have Marxists who desire to prove, against popular opinion, that Marx did believe in some kind of human nature. According to Joseph Fracchia, supporters of a Marxian human nature have a difficult task because, among other things,
they have to explain how a universal human nature can exist within a historical-materialist theory of humanity. At this point, the argument is already lost because there simply is no way to support a substantive concept of human nature that transcends social construction in some way and remain faithful to Marx. It may very well be possible to combine a historical-materialist and an evolutionary-biological theory of human development and nature independent of what Marx has written. But, there is, apparently, a strong desire for people who are already Marxists to make Marx support what they believe about human nature. It is this fidelity to Marx that I find problematic for two reasons: (1) Marx did not have anything to say about a biological, transhistorical human nature, and (2) support for a theory of human nature by some Marxists against those Marxists who embrace social construction gives a false picture of real conflict between these two positions. In reality, the conflict amounts to little more than a squabble over semantics. At its most well-defined, Marxian human nature is never able to transcend its fixation on subject-object relations, and it never says what attributes of human nature might be non-social (i.e. strictly biological). In the end, this conflict has the effect of obscuring a third position, originating from the natural sciences, that has something significant to say about the biological roots of human characteristics, drives, and behaviors. We can learn nothing as long as we insist on remaking a theory that has nothing relevant to say about a transhistorical, transcultural human nature to begin with.
Young Marx on “Human Nature”

For the purposes of investigating Marx’s views on human nature, passages in his early writings provide information that is missing from most of his later work. Marx had a conception of human nature; he refers to it many times in these pages. What is not clear is how he defines this conception. Some of his interpreters argue that Marx conceived of some part of human nature as universal and durable, not beholden to historical change. Although the prevalence of the enduring part of human nature is often inconsequential, nevertheless, Marx is said to believe in a human nature that has some stable attributes, and, therefore, his views on humanity are compatible with conceptions of humanity originating from other fields such as the natural sciences. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, Marx’s perspective on the existence of humans is influenced by the existence of a natural world. Humans, like all animals, live on inorganic nature through the food nature provides and the material resources that can be manipulated to construct products useful for survival. In this sense, Marx acknowledges the natural world and man’s place in the natural order.

Marx is certainly interested in man as a product of the natural world, but this does not mean he believes in a stable, transhistorical human nature. In fact, it would seem that, in these early writings, the natural world takes the place of the social world insofar as it functions to construct humanity. Marx refers to nature as man’s “inorganic body” which suggests that the nature of man exists in the natural world itself, the externality of such a concept mitigating a real internal human nature. He says that “[j]ust as plants, animals,

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22 Or, as we shall see in Chapter 3, perhaps these parts are not so much missing as they have been intentionally removed.
stones, air, light, etc., constitute theoretically a part of human consciousness, partly as objects of natural science, partly as objects of art . . . so also in the realm of practice they constitute a part of human life and human activity” (Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* 112). Inorganic nature is a part of man’s consciousness as aesthetic or scientific objects of curiosity, but they do not create that consciousness as a true body would. In truth, the only significance inorganic nature has for man is the practices and activities they make possible.

Integral to a conception of a stable human nature is the universality of that nature because a human nature derived from evolutionary history must be applicable to the entire species. Universalism is as taboo a concept for the social constructionists as human nature is, and a defense of its validity would require its own chapter. But for our present purpose, it is enough to point out that even Marx accepted a form of universality based on the ubiquity of the natural world. He says that “[t]he universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his *inorganic* body—both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life activity” (112). Thus, there is at least one characteristic related to human beings that can be considered universally present—the use of man’s “inorganic body” to carry out the practices and activities appropriate to human life. Marx’s universalist perspective is commendable, but even here, in the writings that are supposed to be his definitive statement about human nature, he is using universalism to describe an objective relation that will remain the basis for his social constructionist sociology.
Nature, insofar as it is ubiquitous in reality and in human experience, has no real explanatory power or significance for understanding humanity. Marx says, “That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature” (112). Nature is everything, and, therefore, nature is nothing to us. To speak of nature is to speak of everything that exists, and to speak specifically about human nature, that part of nature that explains “man’s physical and spiritual life,” is to circle back on oneself within a tautological concept. For Marx, nature is the ensemble of objects existing in the material world, and human nature is the ensemble of the relations that exist between those objects. Human nature is not an object at all: it is a functional concept designating a set of practices observed in human behavior. Nature is “the foundation of his [man’s] own human existence,” and “[t]hus society is the unity of being of man with nature—the true resurrection of nature—the naturalism of man and the humanism of nature both brought to fulfillment” (137). Absent here is a distinction between what is man and what is nature; all objects in nature, including man, are equivalent in their naturalism, and, thus, there can be no such thing as an inner human nature independent of the natural world. Man is a natural being by the very fact that he exists in the natural world, but this says nothing about a nature that is peculiar to his existence independent of the objective relations of which he is necessarily a part.

The human species has evolved from a lower form of animal life, but Marx has little to say about the constraints of this evolutionary history. When speaking of humans and animals, he is more interested in explaining the difference between man and animal—particularly, a difference in how man and animal relate to the natural world.
The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It does not distinguish itself from it. It is *its life activity*. Man makes his life activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity distinguishes man immediately from animal life activity. It is just because of this that he is a species being. Or rather, it is only because he is a species being that he is a conscious being, i.e., that his own life is an object for him. Only because of that is his activity free activity. (113)

Humans are differentiated from all other animals because they can carry out life activity with conscious knowledge that they are doing so. Humans have the power to objectify their life activity, and it is this objectification that elevates man above animals. From this definition, we can conclude that the kind of sophisticated consciousness that is required to objectify one’s life activity must be an essential, internal characteristic of human beings. If there is one certain characteristic of human nature in Marx’s writing, this would be it. While it is important to recognize this characteristic of human nature for what it is, its only function is to separate humans from animals.

In the same passage, Marx identifies life activity as the “essential being” of man; there is no elaboration on consciousness as an essential and universal human characteristic. Instead, sophisticated consciousness is used as a bridge between species to allow Marx to discuss what he actually believes is essential about humans, their objective relation to the external world and the things they produce out of the creative interplay between consciousness and life activity. Marx believes that, because humans have
transcended the non self conscious state of animal life activity, “humanity is not given with membership of the species but is rather an achievement of human history and practical engagement with nature” (Mulhall 20). Determination of human nature does not depend on biologically essential characteristics, not even the uniquely human characteristic of self consciousness. Qualification for belonging to the human species only requires the creative and productive activity that comes from laboring in the material world and interacting with one’s social environment. “A distinctively human nature is one which has transcended purely animal limitations by transforming the process of satisfying basic needs into an affirmation of the richness inherent in human faculties, and by developing drives into new realms of sophistication and subtlety” (20). Presupposed in such an argument is the self-directed transformation of humanity through creative and productive activity. Humans might have evolved from a primitive species, but now that we have reached a level of sophisticated consciousness, not only can we self-reflectively engage in productive activity, but also the “limitations” of animal nature no longer have the power to shape who we are. Evolution is virtually irrelevant for understanding human nature because human nature is intentionally developed.

An example of intentional development in place of evolution can be found in a passage of the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts that deals with the five senses—specifically, that of hearing. Marx says that “music alone awakens in man the sense of music,” and “the most beautiful music has no sense for the unmusical ear” because it “is no object for it . . . my object can only be the confirmation of one of my essential powers” (EPM 140). How are we to interpret these apparently contradictory lines? At
first, it would seem that Marx is taking a hard social constructionist position when he says that the experience of music gives a person a sense for that music. But on the other hand, if music is responsible for the sensation of music, it would be impossible for a person to have an “unmusical ear,” provided that the ear is functioning properly. Marx then returns to the objective relation between music and the sensation of music by claiming, redundantly, that music can only be a personal object if it can be perceived by the senses, what Marx calls the “essential powers.” Here again the use of the word “essential” initially leads one to assume Marx is identifying a characteristic of human nature that is biological in origin and, thus, a property of a transhistorical human nature. But we have already observed him use this word to describe human behaviors that are not exclusively biological or transhistorical.

Marx’s meaning becomes more clear when he moves to a distinction between “social man” and “non-social man.” The senses referred to in this passage are more than the brute senses shared by both humans and animals. There is an evaluative property in Marx’s conception of the senses so that the music perceived by human and animal, although acoustically identical, is sensed differently according to the sophistication of the sensation experienced by the perceiving subject. “Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man's essential being is the richness of subjective human sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form—in short, senses capable of human gratification,.

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23 Or, could it be that what is being “awakened” is a sense that already existed genetically but remained inoperable because it did not have the necessary environmental stimulus for its activation? The ambiguity of the text makes it difficult to understand his meaning, but we can probably dismiss this possibility since it relies on theories popularized after Marx was writing.

24 Recall the equating of the essential being of man with life activity.
senses affirming themselves as essential powers of man) cultivated or brought into being” (141). We can see from this passage that when Marx speaks of the sensation of music, he is actually referring to perception and the interpretation of that perception based on conditioning. Appreciation for a beautiful painting or a moving piece of music is a human faculty “cultivated or brought into being” by a subject-object relation. This relation is what constitutes the unfolding “richness” of humanity, and this state of being is “essential” insofar as it is a universal reality, a mode of being human.

According to the special definition Marx gives to the human senses, it is not incorrect to say that a human sense “comes to be by virtue of its object” (141), provided that we remember that Marx is only talking about the final stage in a long process of evolution. Marx himself seems to recognize this fact when he acknowledges that “[t]he forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present” (141). Marx was an admirer of Darwin, and he believed in the theory of evolution by which a human sense faculty is built up to its present level of sophistication over millions of years of gradual development from a fundamental form. Despite this belief in the evolution of humanity, however, Marx speaks of the senses, and all human characteristics, as though they were disconnected from evolutionary history the moment humanity emerged from animal existence. The sense faculties were evolved, but under the present form of human existence, the biological history is inconsequential compared to the exclusively human history of subject-object relations. The significance of this point might be lessened in the context of a human sense faculty for which an evolutionary

history is closely related. But among the five basic senses, Marx includes what he calls the “mental senses” of love and will, senses he also designates as “practical.”

The influence biology and evolutionary history has on all of these human senses is not discussed. Instead, the only relevant factor in the constitution of these senses is the objective, externally formative stimuli imposing on the senses from the social environment. Mulhall argues that Marx wants to go beyond animal instincts to discuss how social relations transform human drives. He claims that, for a sophisticated drive like love, Marx believes “the animal drive towards reproduction could only be transformed into the human drives of lust and love within the context provided by social structures” (Mulhall 22). No one could deny that the human feeling of love owes its existence in some measure to social structures like marriage and other products of the romantic imagination. But this is beside the point because the issue is not the influence social relations have on human drives and behavior; the real issue is the lack of discussion dedicated to how human drives and behaviors are influenced by biology and evolutionary history. I can agree that social structures are “essential for the general emergence of distinctively human modes of associating with other conspecifics from the basic and often brutal ways in which animals relate to one another” (22). I cannot agree, however, that social structures are the only essential factors determining human drives and behavior.

After reading Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the text that is supposed to most fully demonstrate his views on human nature, we can conclude that by “essential human nature” Marx has in mind the behaviors carried out by persons in
relation to an object. Any possible biologically based predispositions are not discussed. The closest Marx comes to a truly essential characteristic of human nature is in his discussion of the productivity of humans.

Indeed, labor, life-activity, productive life itself, appears in the first place merely as a means of satisfying a need—the need to maintain physical existence. Yet the productive life is the life of the species. It is life-engendering life. The whole character of a species—its species character—is contained in the character of its life activity; and free, conscious activity is man's species character. Life itself appears only as a means to life. (113)

At first, Marx alludes to a “need to maintain physical existence” which begs the question of the specific biologically essential traits that compose such a need. But this is not Marx’s point here; he only mentions it to say that the productive life-activity that satisfies the need is the true essential characteristic of the human species, and it is carried out, apparently, for its own sake. Humans carry out life-activity self-consciously, but this process is inevitable given that humans are self-conscious to begin with. The process of life-activity is elevated to the position of the essence of man, but there is no discussion of how this process is self-conscious to begin with.26 Throughout the text, Marx proves his overriding interest is the relation of human beings to the objects of their environment, not the biological and evolutionary foundation for human characteristics, drives, and behaviors.

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26 We would not necessarily expect there to be since substantive inquiry into the neurobiology of consciousness does not begin until well after Marx’s death.
If life-activity is the basis for what it means to be human, then “it is through productive activity that human beings actualize themselves as human beings” (Wartenberg 79). According to this definition, there is nothing that could be transhistorical about humans other than this perpetual productive life-activity. Thus, Marx opposes any efforts to identify essential characteristics of humans because such characteristics can only be expressions of a particular subject-object relation of the historical moment. According to Wartenberg, “such theories presuppose that the form in which the human being exists in a particular historical period, i.e. under a capitalist form of social organization, is simply human nature—an ahistorical essence of the human being” (92), and no doubt this has been true in many instances. The issue is not about the possibility that many human characteristics, drives, and behaviors are products of a historical moment; I am opposed to the notion that all characteristics, drives, and behaviors are products of a historical moment.

A Marxist-humanist Interpretation of the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach

According to the sixth thesis on Feuerbach, Marx claims that “the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual . . . it is the ensemble of the social relations.”27 Proponents of a socially constructed human nature gravitate toward such a pronouncement because of the apparent support it gives to their argument, that human nature is a product of a particular historical situation. The primary implication of such a belief is that human nature can be conceived as changeable, mutable, infinitely malleable

27 Quoted from the Marxist Internet Archive: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm
a convenient state of reality for anyone with a vision for how humanity ought to be). A malleable human nature means that no human behavior, impulse, or motivation is impossible to change, and thus, to refrain from reforming human behavior would be unethical. Marx, despite what he might actually believe about human nature, participates in the vision of malleable human beings precisely because of passages like the sixth thesis which seem to suggest that all that is required for a better humanity is a reconstruction of the social environment.

The question becomes, would Marx agree with the way passages like the sixth thesis are interpreted by social constructionists, and if he would not, does this make any difference to how his writing is actually used? Apparently, what Marx actually believed is of great importance to many people, as is evidenced by the massive amount of exegetical material dedicated to Marx’s writings. But the interest is only “apparent” because it is not clear how much Marx’s belief actually influences the interpretation and implementation of his writings. One would assume that, at least among literary critics, the attempt to divine Marx’s intention in such passages would be a controversial endeavor. Perhaps it is not the intention that Marx’s interpreters are pursuing but, rather, the meaning of an independent text, in which case the constant reference to what Marx believed is only a semantical inaccuracy.

I do not know how it would be possible to make a distinction between those who are interested in what Marx believed and those who are interested in what they can conclude from his writings, but I would suspect that, even if it was possible to prove Marx believed something in opposition to the popular way a particular argument is
interpreted, this would have little effect on what his interpreters believe about the argument for themselves, independent of what Marx actually believes. Nevertheless, we should not discount the importance of Marx’s authority on a particular issue like that of the sixth thesis. Despite what one might actually think about the fallacy of inquiring into authorial intention, there is, no doubt, a sense of validation when considering that the man one inevitably believes to be a preeminent authority on a particular matter holds the same belief as the interpreter.28

One comes to the text looking for confirmation of what one already believes, and while there is a possibility that the text might alter those beliefs, it is more likely that one will find the necessary evidence to maintain the pre-held belief. Recognizing this fact is important because it raises awareness of how Marx is being used, and it allows for freedom to use him for our own purposes. Explicating the text is only the first step. Rarely does the explication change what one believes, and even if it does, there are undoubtedly reasons external to the text that would beg a disagreement. In short, we need not view Marx as a tyrant demanding rigid adherence to his text, nor is it desirable to do so because such an attitude closes off the possibility of finding the truth of the matter independent of what a particular author believes to be the truth. Interpretation for its own sake is relatively impotent; the real significance is in the evaluation.

Taking a first look at the sixth thesis, one would assume Marx is indeed supporting a social constructionist position. To say that the essence of a person is an ensemble of social relations seems to strongly suggest that what makes a person is

28 I write “inevitable” because no one would dedicate so much time to interpreting a text if they did not respect the intellect of the person who created it.
dependent on factors external to the individual. Social relations could thus refer to any type of relationship the individual has with an environment; the existence of a particular social relation is not necessary to constitute a personal essence, but it is clear that there is no essence without some type of social relation. However, it is interesting that Marx maintains the use of the word “essence” in the negation of the first half of the thesis. As a response to Feuerbach, “essence” is the necessary terminology but only insofar as the response needs to engage Feuerbach. Marx’s negation of Feuerbach’s position no longer requires the use of his term if it does not represent what Marx wants to argue. But the term remains, suggesting that what Marx wants to do is not negate the idea of a human essence but, rather, to redefine it. In the search for a transhistorical Marxian human nature, identifying a redefinition might not get us very far. After all, the essence is still inextricably linked to an environment. But it is encouraging, nonetheless, that Marx maintains the use of such a concept.

We should also not make the mistake of analyzing this claim by Marx without considering what it is a response to. Feuerbach’s position, at least according to Marx, is that the essence of man is, in fact, an abstraction inherent in each single individual. Despite his departure from Hegelian idealism for a more materialist philosophy, idealism still influences Feuerbach’s thinking, and it is this tendency that Marx responds to in the sixth thesis. When Marx says that “the essence of man is no abstraction,” he is rejecting the notion that the essence is an idea separated from material conditions. Furthermore, the claim that the idea is “inherent in each single individual” suggests that the isolated individual is sufficient for the possession of the abstraction. The overall sense of the line
is that persons exist primarily as independent beings who possess an essence that is idealistic in nature and exists prior to, and independent of, environmental exposure or a social relation. Therefore, in seeking to negate Feuerbach’s claim, Marx needs to reject one extreme idea—that the essence of a person is an abstraction—and replace it with a suitably powerful negation—that the essence of an individual is not an abstraction, is brought into existence through a social relation, and is thus dependent and non-inherent. But could there be more possibilities for this essence that Marx inadvertently omits through the use of the negation?

Norman Geras argues there are three ways in which this line by Marx could be interpreted, each possibility involving a different aspect of the relation between the social world and the human individual.\(^29\) Perhaps human nature is only conditioned by the ensemble of social relations, in which case there can still be some form of human nature that precedes the social world, albeit, subjected to that world and shaped by it. Another possibility is that human nature is manifested in the ensemble of social relations, in which case there is an autonomous human nature, but it can only be realized or observed in the context of the social world. Either option is acceptable to Geras because in both instances there is no need to sacrifice the idea of a real and significant human nature. It is the third option that he rejects outright, the one that tends to be associated with what Marx wrote in the sixth thesis; that is, human nature is determined by the ensemble of social relations and, thus, has no existence outside of social relations and has no autonomy when encompassed by social relations. Consequently, Geras wants to argue that Marx is not

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\(^29\) For further discussion, see Geras, *Marx and Human Nature* 46.
denying human nature that is autonomous in some sense; instead, he claims that Marx is qualifying the definition of human nature in distinction to what Feuerbach has to say on the matter.

When listing the consequent positions Feuerbach would be obliged to accept if his argument about the essence of man were true, Marx notes that “the essence therefore can by him only be regarded as ‘species,’ as an inner ‘dumb’ generality which unites many individuals only in a natural way.” Marx does not say that Feuerbach’s focus on the species character of humans is wrong; he states that to only focus on this aspect is wrong, an issue of inaccuracy rather than falsity. Geras argues that

The sentence permits the interpretation that, for Marx, Feuerbach is mistaken not because he views man in terms of ‘inner,’ ‘general,’ ‘species’ (or ‘natural’) characteristics but because he views him exclusively in those terms. He is wrong for a one-sidedness of perspective rather than wrong tout court. On that interpretation, Marx would here be echoing the thought he communicated to Arnold Ruge two years earlier. Feuerbach, Marx wrote, ‘refers too much to nature and too little to politics.’ (Geras, *Marx and Human Nature* 31)

Geras’s interpretation is plausible but only because the line by Marx is ambiguous to begin with. In order to interpret the line as Geras does, he must presuppose what Marx actually believes about human nature independent of how he communicates it. We could assume that the phrase “only be regarded” is intended to allow for addition to the list of properties that constitute the essence of man. But it would be equally plausible to assume

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30 Marxist Internet Archive: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm
that “only be regarded” is intended to identify a terminal limit to Feuerbach’s total perspective. In other words, Marx could be saying that Feuerbach can only think the way he does because of what he presupposes about the immutable and vaguely idealist nature of the essence of man. Thus, there could never be an addition of constituent properties to the essence of man because Feuerbach’s perspective eliminates such a possibility.

Geras picks one of these two possibilities and attempts to reverse engineer Marx’s original intention—he starts with what Marx wrote and tries to deduce what Marx must have thought. What is important to understand about this method is that it assumes the importance of authorial intention. There may be no way to get at the meaning of the text other than the exegetical method Geras employs here, but ultimately it seems like a diversion because what is being hidden in this type of semantical analysis is that Geras wants Marx to believe that Feuerbach is only limited in how he defines the essence of man. Geras reveals this himself when half way through his book he abandons interpreting Marx and begins to talk about why it is desirable to conceive of human nature as more than a social construction. Are we to believe then that if Geras realized Marx had a different view of human nature that this would cause him to reevaluate his own belief about the desirability of a Marxian human nature? Most likely, he would drop the first half altogether and continue on with what he thinks is most important, theorizing a particular kind of human nature that accommodates his ethical perspective. We are left with two possibilities, neither one being desirable to accept. Either Geras’s interpretation of Marx is a cover for what he really wants to say about human nature, in which case the entire interpretation is superfluous, or he thinks that, by demonstrating Marx believes the
same thing he does, Geras’s own position is more legitimate, in which case he is committing a form of the intentional fallacy by relying on the authority of the author to validate his own theory.

We could apply Geras’s method of semantical analysis to the first obligatory position as well to generate a similar type of reading. Marx says that Feuerbach must “abstract from the historical process and to define the religious sentiment regarded by itself, and to presuppose an abstract, isolated, human individual.” Presupposing that Marx believes in a certain kind of human nature, we could say that to abstract from the historical process is only a mistaken method for coming up with an appropriate list of constituent properties for a human nature. After all, Marx does not specifically say that abstracting from the historical process is always wrong; it only is so when it leads to the conclusion that the historical process has nothing to do with the essence of man. This is an argument Geras could make himself, and it does possess a certain persuasiveness, as long as one does not subject it to scrutiny. But under closer examination, this type of argument is based on the absence of knowledge. It would be logically equivalent to arguing that because no ancient text mentions the founding of humankind by aliens, it is therefore acceptable to consider the possible truth of such an origin story. In other words, anything that is not directly stated in a text is fair game for speculation meaning that there is no basic standard for what the text needs to say to begin that speculation. Thus, Geras can read Marx’s sixth thesis on Feuerbach, note the absence of a denial of a human nature based on anything but the ensemble of social relations, and then write a book arguing that

31 Marxist Internet Archive: http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/index.htm
therefore Marx must believe that something other than the ensemble of social relations is also responsible for the essence of man.

Geras does not accept that human beings have no inherent qualities and for this he should be commended, but his attempt to refashion Marx as a humanist is problematical. Geras characterizes the conflict as being between those who believe in the existence of human nature and those who do not. What largely goes unmentioned by him is that there is a difference between a human nature that is conditioned by, or manifested in, social relations and a transhistorical, transcultural human nature that is not dependent on social relations for its objective existence. Geras is arguing for the first of these options, a human nature that owes its constitution, if not its existence, to the social world. Missing in this definition of human nature is the biological core of the human individual that has been built up over millions of years of evolutionary history. Geras, along with every other Marxist and social constructionist, would no doubt grant the existence of a biological core in every human being, but the biological is viewed as only a substrate of the socially constructed individual with no significant causal power and is thus dismissed as a triviality. Therefore, although it appears Geras is arguing on the side of human nature, his position is much closer to the social constructionists than to supporters of a real biological human nature.

The first Marxian position that Geras could support is that human nature is conditioned by the social world. He claims that “Marx would be wanting . . . to stress the conditioning always exercised on it [human nature] by the prevailing social relations, but he would not be denying that there are general characteristics” (Geras 47). Again, Geras
can argue that Marx would not be denying general characteristics of an intrinsic human nature because of the logic of absence he established earlier. Marx does not explicitly say there are no intrinsic characteristics of human nature; therefore, Marx believes there are general characteristics intrinsic to human nature. The logic is spurious; but beyond the logic is the question of whether or not this formulation of human nature is actually substantial enough to be worth mentioning. The answer is found in the meaning of the word “conditioned.” Geras leaves the word unexplained; he only juxtaposes it to “determined,” and, thus, “conditioned” is defined according to what it is not—an omnipotent force exercising total control over human nature. If conditioning is somehow less pervasive than determination, the question is how much less and to what extent does human nature remain independent from the influence of the social world.

There are two ways in which conditioning could be “less” than determination: either it exercises authority over human nature in total, or it exercises this authority selectively. In the first case, there is no real qualitative difference between conditioning and determination because the only way to measure if human nature is determined is by its final constitution. As long as human nature is constituted in a way different than it would have been if it had not been embedded in the social world at all, the difference between conditioning and determination is merely semantical. The only way to establish a real difference between the two would be if conditioning somehow failed to shape human nature according to a predictable outcome. In this case, we are dealing with the second way in which conditioning could be less pervasive than determination, the variable outcomes that conditioning have for human nature. But if conditioning is only
sometimes successful in shaping human nature, what can explain the instances where it fails to do so? If human nature can in any way escape the consequences of social conditioning, it must be concluded that there is something about the general characteristics of human nature that resist conditioning, something inherent, beyond the reach of the social world and its construction, something indestructible and, therefore, essential.

And what of the second possibility for explaining human nature as being the ensemble of social relations, that of the necessity of the social world as a medium through which human nature can be manifested? Geras argues that “[t]he range of human qualities and possibilities takes actual shape in the relations between individuals, so it is these relations that must be investigated if you would grasp that nature entire” (49). There is a certain intuitive appeal in this logic that makes the claim seem plausible—and, in fact, it is quite sensible. But, it is also tautological. How else would we be able to identify characteristics of human nature if not through observation of human behavior? And if observation of human behavior is necessary, then the manifestation of human nature in social relations is an inevitability because observation presupposes an observer. In other words, on a rudimentary level, it would be impossible to understand human nature without also being able to observe it in social situations that would provoke a particular behavior.

Not only does the observation of human behavior require a social context, but the behavior itself also requires some type of stimulus from the environment. Interaction between organism and environment is a necessary and inescapable reality of biological
life. While an organism is born already equipped with a detailed genetic blueprint for its development, the environment in which the organism lives influences how this development proceeds. If this sounds similar to the way Geras claims human nature is conditioned by the social world, we should remember that the environment only has an influence on the development of the organism and is in no way the ubiquitous arbiter of how that development proceeds. The environment also provides for the organism every situation in which a choice or reaction occurs. So, while it is true that human nature is manifested in the ensemble of social relations, this truism does not amount to much since it would be impossible to have human behavior without a situation in which the behavior could be enacted. And since, for humans, these life situations are primarily social, it is not untrue to claim that human nature is manifested in the social world by human behavior.

Geras’s argument about the manifestation of human nature in the ensemble of social relations would seem to fall in line with this mode of biological-environmental interactivity. He says that a particular human behavior “has an intrinsic universality and permanence which can be put down to human nature and, simultaneously . . . it is an ability only manifested in society” (48). By “intrinsic universality,” Geras is referring to human characteristics that are shared by all peoples, and by “permanence,” he is referring to the continual existence of such characteristics regardless of a particular culture or historical moment.32 This is a standard position taken by supporters of an enduring, biologically based human nature, and it would appear that Geras (and all the other

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32 The existence of such characteristics is certainly a contentious issue. In this passage its truth is taken as self-evident, but it will be discussed later in the paper.
Marxist-humanists) believes in such a definition of human nature. However, implicit in his argument is an assumption that the social world remains the ultimate determining factor in how human nature is constituted which negates anything argued to the contrary. For example, Sean Sayers argues that a Marxian human nature is based on the need to be productive. If human nature is to be distinct from social construction, it must be transhistorical and transcultural. But after invoking the concept of human nature and defining its characteristics, Sayers negates human nature by claiming that to say productivity is transhistorical or transcultural is to abstract that concept from social life. Thus, to remain a true believer in historical materialism, Sayers claims, “with economic development, human needs—human nature itself—alter and develop” (Sayers 134).

To argue that human nature can be altered by the economic order is to argue that there is nothing substantial about human nature at all. Holding such a theory makes it impossible to distinguish one from the social constructionists, and thus, claims made by some followers of Marx that they, and Marx, believe in human nature are disingenuous because what they mean by human nature is exactly what the social constructionists mean, a malleable, nonessential human core responsible for human behavior and that is determined by the social order. Geras eventually reveals his social constructionist leanings when he discusses some of the characteristics of human nature—like language—and argues that “[t]he exoteric actuality may now be a changing rather than a common and enduring one” (Geras 49). In other words, perhaps there was at one time a human nature that was more stable, probably a natural consequence of a more primitive way of life. But now that the social world has reached a high degree of sophistication, it is now
inevitable that what constitutes the human individual must be determined by social relations.

Humanism and Human Nature

In Marx’s Conception of Man, Eric Fromm argues that “Marx's philosophy, like much of existentialist thinking, represents a protest against man's alienation, his loss of himself and his transformation into a thing” (Fromm 7). Placing human beings at the center of the material world, Marx’s philosophy “is a movement against the dehumanization and automatization of man inherent in the development of Western industrialism” (7). According to Fromm, humanism is a natural position for Marx because his philosophy is founded in the philosophical tradition of Spinoza and the French and German enlightenment philosophers who are concerned with “man and the realization of his potentialities” (7). And so, like Geras, Fromm is another Marxist-humanist who believes that Marx—despite the lack of humanist rhetoric in the writings following the 1844 manuscripts—is primarily concerned with humans, their experience, and their emancipation from the alienation caused by their objectification. However, unlike Geras, Fromm seems less concerned with how humans are constituted than he is with their situation in the world.

According to Fromm, although Marx was a materialist, he took a position against the naturalists and scientists of his day because they advocated a kind of philosophical materialism that Marx believed was antithetical to humanism.

This materialism claimed that the substratum of all mental and spiritual phenomena was to be found in matter and material processes. In its most vulgar
and superficial form, this kind of materialism taught that feelings and ideas are sufficiently explained as results of chemical bodily processes, and ‘thought is to the brain what urine is to the kidneys.’ (Fromm 23)

This “vulgar” naturalism of Marx’s contemporaries remains strong today in the philosophical form of eliminative materialism which claims that all mental states can be reduced to brain states. Fromm characterizes eliminative materialism and similar physicalisms as “mechanical” in that they tend to ignore the historical process in shaping humanity. What the eliminative materialist and the physicalist believe about the importance of the historical process, I do not know. However, if this kind of naturalism is true, there does not seem to be any necessary elimination of the historical process because eliminative materialism and physicalism are not theories about how humans become what they are through macro processes like history—they are, rather, theories about the micro-level, physiological mechanisms that process the subjective experience of history and produce dispositions, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors in response to those experiences. Biological limitations and predispositions are also active in this process, so what results is a product of the complex interaction between biological organism and its environment.

As a response to Fromm and Marxist-humanism as a philosophy, physicalist theories like eliminative materialism seem to be beside the point because the Marxist-humanist is ultimately concerned with the existence of humanity in the social world and the ways in which humans are objectified because of it. Therefore, despite the fact that eliminative materialists and natural scientists in general are trying to explain the
constitution of the human individual, their scientific inquiry is nothing other than one
more attempt at human objectification. If labor in the capitalist mode of production
objectifies man by separating him from the product of his labor, then physicalism also
objectifies man in that his subjective, conscious experience of the objective world, which
he intuitively and dualistically believes to be separate from the objective world, is
revealed to be wholly merged with the objective world so that his subjective experience is
taken away from him.

Ironically, the alienation caused by physicalist theories is a result of the
unification of subjective consciousness and the objective world. This fact alone provides
us with all we need to know about the Marxist-humanist application of the concept of
human nature. If the Marxist-humanists are truly concerned with restoring to man his true
self, then they should embrace the physicalist constitution of human nature and accept the
reunification of man’s subjective consciousness with the objective world. But, the
perceived objectification in such a reunification proves that what the Marxist-humanists
actually mean by “human nature” is “the way in which humans exist socially.” Therefore,
they should stop invoking “human nature” altogether because their definition of the term
is a mystification intended to make it appear as though there is no conflict between Marx
and the biological sciences.

Fromm perpetuates this mystification by claiming that Marx believes in “the
nature of man” by which he means to say that Marx does not believe human beings are
blank slates upon which culture can freely construct a persona. On the contrary, Fromm
says that “Marx started out with the idea that man qua man is a recognizable and
ascertainable entity; that man can be defined as man not only biologically, anatomically and physiologically, but also psychologically” (Fromm 38). But, exactly what Fromm means by “biology,” “anatomy,” “physiology,” and “psychology” is rather ambiguous because these aspects of human nature are not actually defined individually. One gets the sense that Fromm means only to use these categories in the most limited and tautological way possible—i.e., humans exist as organic matter and thus they are *ipso facto* biological, and they necessarily possess anatomical structures and subjectively experience psychological states. Missing from these equivocal definitions, however, is the capacity of the biological aspect of human beings to cause—or, at least, influence—who they are and what they do. For Fromm, biology only constitutes the matter that gives human beings a physical form. The only true essence of human beings is their potential to create themselves through history. Therefore, “[man] is his own product” (40), and he is this to the exclusion of anything else, including evolutionary history.

The Naturalness of Egoism

Comparing this definition of “the essence of man” with the definition of human nature in Chapter 1, we seem to be stuck with two irreconcilable conceptions of what it means to be human. Perhaps the only solution to this problem is to continue to provide, as I did in Chapter 1, more support for the evolutionary theory of human nature in the hope that the preponderance of evidence will eventually break the deadlock. Toward this end, I would like to conclude this chapter by briefly considering the function of egoism in human nature. In writing about Marx’s conception of human nature, Peter Archibald poses a question about the naturalness of “the nasty human passions of aggressiveness,
avarice, and egoism” (Archibald 89). After considering a few possibilities, he concludes that, most likely, “Marx considered such propensities to be totally historically specific, and in this sense ‘unnatural,’ even ‘artificial’” (89), and this is also how most Marxists would explain egoism and the like.\(^3\)

However, according to biologist Richard Dawkins, egoism is a permanent feature of the natural world due to the way in which organic material evolves. He argues that “a predominant quality to be expected in a successful gene is ruthless selfishness” which “will usually give rise to selfishness in individual behavior” (Dawkins 2). This conclusion is based on the logic of evolution by natural selection. The goal of genes is to survive through the process of replication and transfer, and thus the genes that exhibit selfish characteristics increase their chances of survival. As the organism that contains these genes becomes more physiologically complex, this selfishness is expressed in behaviors that are intended to ensure the survival of the genetic material.\(^4\) According to Dawkins, “Natural selection favours genes that control their survival machines in such a way that they make the best use of their environment. This includes making the best use of other survival machines, both of the same and of different species” (Dawkins 66). So, in the context of evolution, egoism is advantageous because it increases the chances that an organism will be able to reproduce and continue the survival of its genetic material.

\(^3\) Perhaps this is another example of Marx’s Romanticism about the constitution of human beings in a Rousseauan-conceived society where egoism is developed as a result of scarcity.

\(^4\) Genes are not conscious entities, and so it is somewhat awkward to speak of them as if they actually have intentions and other psychological motivations. This language is used only for the sake of simplicity. In reality, the “selfishness” that is expressed by genes and the organisms they compose is behavioral, not subjective. It might be that this kind of selfishness influences one’s subjective mental or doxastic states, but it should be made clear that “selfishness” is not subjectively deterministic.
I briefly summarize egoism in Dawkins' theory only to make this one point: if Marxist-humanists like Fromm and Geras insist on speaking of human nature in Marxist philosophy, they must look beyond the borders of that philosophy and decide if their use of the concept “human nature” remains relevant in light of how it is now defined in the natural sciences. I am not disputing the value of a Marxist-humanist philosophy that is concerned with the well-being of humanity, but for the sake of that philosophy, they cannot continue to frame their humanism in terms of human nature because that semantic choice no longer applies to what they want to say.
In this chapter, I will now consider the inverse of Marxist-humanism—Marxist anti-humanism—as exemplified by the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser. Unlike the Marxist-humanists, Althusser believes that everything Marx wrote before 1845 is ideological and can therefore not be included in Marxist philosophy. He believes that Marx initiated a radical break with the ideological philosophies of his time by founding the science of historical materialism by which the social world and human activity can be made intelligible, but this intelligibility can only be achieved when humans are removed from the study of history. Thus, Althusser characterizes the scientific philosophy of Marx as being grounded in theoretical anti-humanism, the science of the social structures and historical processes that constitute the human individual. For Althusser, human nature (if such a thing even exists) is not derived from within each individual human but is instead constructed by historical processes. In this sense, Althusser is radically opposed to the evolutionary biologists and psychologists who claim that human nature is constituted by non-social biology. He is also opposed to the Marxist-humanists who claim that human nature—if not biologically derived—is, nevertheless, important for human emancipation. While I agree with Althusser’s interpretation of Marx over the Marxist-humanist
interpretation, he is unable to provide an adequate definition of what it means to be human because he does not have a theory of human nature.

Essentialism

In *For Marx*, Althusser analyzes the connection between Marxism and Humanism by elucidating the humanist ideology in the early works of Marx and his subsequent break with this ideology in 1845. Characteristic of this humanist ideology is a focus on what Marx calls “the essence of man,” or what the Marxist-humanists might consider human nature. I have no doubt that an analysis of these two concepts would reveal differences in their metaphysical realities, but at the moment, I am interested in their similarity on one point. “Human nature” and “the essence of man” can both be understood as designating something essential about human beings, a quality or set of qualities that endure beyond particular historical moments or cultural locations. Identifying the nature or essence of human beings is, therefore, an empirical matter, and it can be discovered through observation. All that is required for such an investigation are reliable sources and methods that can demonstrate the transhistorical and transcultural nature of a particular human quality.

What limitations, if any, can be placed on an essential human quality? It is not necessary to postulate an essential quality that extends back to the first instantiation of a human being, although some essential qualities might very well have existed in the
originator of our species. The only temporal requirement is that it exists beyond a certain number of consecutive historical periods. This number is left indeterminate because there is no corresponding limit placed on the definition of a historical period or moment. Historians and theoriticians alike routinely attempt to carve out distinct historical periods based on a determinate set of criteria, but each set is exclusive to varying degrees, and none of them have attained the status of incontrovertible law. Some historical periods do have a broad consensus—e.g., the Reconstruction Era and the Progressive Era in United States history—and, certainly, these periods do exist according to the set of criteria that are applied to produce them. They exist by virtue of their perceived differences, but when this perspective is reversed to focus on similarities between historical periods, the demarcation, despite its practicality, begins to look quite arbitrary. Because these variable boundaries exist between historical periods based on the set of classificatory criteria that are used, it is impossible to define, with certainty, where a historical period begins and ends.

While the temporal measure of an essential human quality remains indeterminate, there should be no limitation insofar as cultural location is concerned. Essential human qualities, at least from a biological perspective, are grounded in the evolution of the entire human species long before the emergence of highly complex and distinct cultures. Consequently, whatever the particular cultural practices of two individuals might be, they

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35 By “originator” I do not mean to suggest that we could theoretically discover such a singular organism, nor do I intend to imbue this hypothetical organism with quasi-theological powers. My only purpose in speaking in this manner is to establish a temporal measure that accomplishes the supersession of particular historical moments. It is also worth noting that an essential human quality might extend beyond our first human ancestors into earlier species in the evolutionary tree of life. For example, our primate ancestors possessed an instinct for seeking out sources of food, just as humans do, and, thus, this instinct could also be classified as an essential hominoid quality.
should still manifest qualities that are universally recognized as “human.” For example, just as the instinct for seeking out sources of food extends beyond historical periods, such an instinct and its resultant behavior are universally expressed independently of particular cultural context. And if there is a tendency by some to dismiss such an example as trivial, I argue that it is merely a heuristic tool against which many more examples can be given. And in response to the objection that this instinct also exists in non-humans and so cannot provide a definition for what it means to be human, I argue that the limitation of essential human qualities to existence in humans alone is an arbitrary and unnecessary exclusion. By “essential quality,” I do not mean to establish a set of criteria by which we can judge whether or not one is, in fact, human, but rather, I am only referring to qualities that are expressed universally in humans. Essential qualities, in my usage, are empirical, not evaluative.

In the same fashion, Marx’s humanist philosophy of “the essence of man” is an empirical fact not intended for classifying human from non-human. However, this conception of human essence was intended to carry a value judgment about Marx’s political world. Althusser says that Marx’s “First Stage was dominated by a liberal-rationalist humanism” in response to “his conflict with censorship, Rhenish feudal laws, Prussian despotism” (For Marx 223). As a result of political struggle, Marx formulated a “philosophy of man” that was ideological in nature only because it was not properly scientific. According to this ideology, “[o]nly the essence of man makes history, and this essence is freedom and reason” (223). It was necessary to philosophize in this way because, by making freedom and reason the essence of humanity, Marx could
legitimately oppose any institution or political entity that limited the freedom of man. And if this limitation was predicated on unreasonable modes of thought or action, the violation of human freedom would be all the more egregious.

For the ideological Marx, the essence of man is not a matter of biology, nor does it appear to be primarily subjective. As Althusser points out, “man is only freedom-reason because he is first of all 'Gemeinwesen', 'communal being', a being that is only consummated theoretically (science) and practically (politics) in universal human relations, with men and with his objects (external nature ‘humanized’ by labour)” (226). The essence of man is first and foremost a feature of the objective, external world in which human beings live together, work together, and drive forward history and politics together. Again we see the gap that opens up between Marx and the Marxist-humanists who seek a theory of human nature in his writings. It is not the nature of humans to “be freedom”—they can only live in freedom that arises necessarily from humans bound together by social relations that provide the background against which freedom can be understood. The Marxist humanists want to convert “the essence of man” to “human nature” and thereby establish some objective fact about the subjectivity of the human individual. Althusser, to his credit, rejects this attempted conversion by maintaining the ideological character of the early writings of Marx and the supersession of any notion of a Marxist humanism by the later writings that replace ideology with scientificity.

We can again see the externalized nature of the essence of man in the very realization of that essence and also in the solution to the problem of its violation. According to Althusser,
History is the alienation and production of reason in unreason, of the true man in the alienated man. Without knowing it, man realizes the essence of man in the alienated products of his labour . . . [t]he loss of man that produces history and man must presuppose a definite pre-existing essence. At the end of history, this man, having become inhuman objectivity, has merely to re-grasp as subject his own essence alienated in property, religion and the State to become total man, true man. (226)

The catalyst for the realization of man’s essence is the alienation experienced when the products of man’s labor are separated from him. It is not the object produced by labor itself that carries for man his essence; rather, it is the process of bringing into existence the object as an expression of the creativity of man that constitutes this essence. Likewise, to reach the state of “true man” he must take back his essence, which is his freedom, by ending his alienation caused by institutions that turn him into an object. The process by which man becomes true man clearly demonstrates the difference between Marx’s conception of the essence of man and human nature. To re-grasp as subject one’s own human nature is incoherent because, at its core, human nature is internalized in the individual whereas the essence of man is manifest in his social relations.

36 The boundary between the productive relation and the internal subjectivity of man is indistinct (e.g. how deeply does the experience of alienation penetrate into man’s subjectivity?) Marxist humanists might argue that this experience is part of the human nature that is latent in these writings by Marx, but it is not at all clear that there is anything biological about alienation, i.e., some type of mechanism that exists prior to the external act of alienating a person from their labor. As far as I can tell, the subjective experience of alienation along with the capacity for such an experience springs into existence at the moment man is subjected to an alienation-producing social situation.
Ideology

In 1845, Marx turns away from his humanistic theory of history and politics to found a radically new science based on “concepts of social formation, productive forces, relations of production, superstructure, ideologies, determination in the last instance by the economy, specific determination of the other levels, etc.” (Althusser 227). According to Althusser, by classifying all humanistic philosophies as ideologies, Marx had made a scientific discovery. In the Sixth Thesis on Feuerbach, Marx critiques the two postulates of humanistic idealist philosophies, “that there is a universal essence of man” and “that this essence is the attribute of 'each single individual' who is its real subject” (228). Althusser argues that, taken together, these postulates “presuppose a whole empiricist-idealistic world outlook” (228), and this perspective leads to the conclusion that persons exist as concrete subjects in the world, as “absolute givens.” Implied in this existence is an “empiricism of the subject” which entails that these subjects must possess, individually, the entire human essence, implying “an idealism of the essence” (228).

This logic constituted the philosophical problematic that Marx confronted—empiricism of the subject implying idealism of the essence and its inverse, empiricism of the essence implying idealism of the subject. These philosophical structures can be identified in many pre-Marxist philosophies, perhaps most obviously in the empiricist-idealistic dichotomies of Locke and Kant. The crucial point about these disparate philosophies is that “the terms presented and their relations only vary within the invariant type-structure which constitutes this very problematic: an empiricism of the subject always corresponds to an idealism of the essence {or an empiricism of the essence to an
idealism of the subject)” (228). The genius of Marx was to destroy the entire philosophical problematic by rejecting the premise on which it was based, the essence of man in all philosophical categories. Marx replaced the old concepts with new ones and developed a new methodology for philosophical inquiry—that is, historical materialism.

“Thus, when Marx replaced the old couple individuals/human essence in the theory of history by new concepts (forces of production, relations of production, etc.), he was, in fact, simultaneously proposing a new conception of ‘philosophy’” (229).

To make Marx’s philosophical innovation more clear, consider the difference between Marx and Hegel. A typical view of the Marx-Hegel relationship is that Marx replaced Hegelian idealism with a materialist conception of modes of production in order to explain the historical development of societies. All that is required is to use, for example, the industrial mode of production to explain the development of the 20th century United States in place of whatever ideas or ideals were operating simultaneously in the consciousness of the citizens, politicians, and intellectual leaders of the time.

Contradiction remains a central factor in the historical process, however, “it is not contradiction within the Idea but the contradiction that characterizes any mode of production that divides a society into classes. In this way, the theoretical innovation originated by Marx is conceived as a synthesis of Hegelian philosophy and English political economy” (Gordy 4). Marx takes from Hegel the concepts needed to think about structural unity, such as contradiction and transcendence, and adds concepts from the English political economists, like exchange and surplus value, in order to “analyze the bourgeois mode of production” (4). This interpretation of the Marx-Hegel relationship
maintains the empiricist-idealist relationship inherent in the pre-Marxist philosophical problematic; instead of focusing on the Idea as the essence of historical development and then dealing with the subjects of history empirically, Marx begins with the subjects of history embedded in historical modes of production and works toward an essence of the subject from another direction. Althusser’s point is that historical materialism, properly understood as a science of historical development, is not a synthesis of Hegelian idealism at all—it is a science that has exorcised the human subject from historical development by means of theoretical anti-humanism.37

While Marx’s “theoretical anti-humanism” destroyed the “myth of man,” this destruction only goes as far as theoretical practice can allow. This is because the knowledge of a theoretical truth about the nature of a thing does not entail the dissolution of that thing. For this reason, Marx did not believe that money, as a social relation, could be swept away by recognition of its true nature because the “appearance [is] its very being, as necessary as the existing mode of production” (230). The same is true for the existence of ideologies. As Althusser points out,

Marx never believed that an ideology might be dissipated by a knowledge of it:

for the knowledge of this ideology, as the knowledge of its conditions of possibility, of its structure, of its specific logic and of its practical role, within a

37 Related to the issue of an author’s empiricism is the empiricism of the reader. “Empiricist readings of texts generally place significant weight on author’s intentions, because this evidence regarding a text’s meaning appears to circumvent the inevitable ambiguities inherent in interpretation” (Davis, “Althusser’s View of the Place of Ethics in Marx’s Thought 102). But, the author has no more authority when it comes to the interpretation of the text than an equally informed reader because both reading and writing take place within the structure of theoretical practice. Therefore, one individual interpretation is not necessarily more valuable to the meaning of the text insofar as the text is channeling a theoretical view about the world.
given society, is simultaneously knowledge of the conditions of its necessity.

(230)

In other words, the conditions for the existence of a humanist ideology are separate from the theoretical reflection that might be exercised upon the conditions. Revealing the ideological nature of a humanist philosophy is, to use an unfortunate metaphor, merely academic because the reasons that created the philosophy and give it its value have little to do with the theoretical reality of the human subject. The humanist believes that human beings constitute the essence of social life because such a philosophy makes possible various political actions. These actions are carried out because the humanist philosophy has assigned a certain value to human beings that legitimizes and makes necessary the requisite political actions that will accord with this value. The theoretical truth about the essence of man is irrelevant because the essence is valuable independent of its scientific status, hence its classification as an ideology.

Marx himself was writing from a humanist perspective before 1845 until he discovered a new anti-humanist science of history. But one might ask (and Marxists have) why a Marxist-humanist philosophy should be avoided. Althusser provides one possible answer: theoretical anti-humanism is a basic necessity for any potential Marxist policy regarding humanism.

Marx's theoretical anti-humanism, by relating it to its conditions of existence, recognizes a necessity for humanism as an ideology, a conditional necessity. The recognition of this necessity is not purely speculative. On it alone can Marxism base a policy in relation to the existing ideological forms, of every kind: religion,
Thus, ideologies serve a practical purpose; Marxist policies need ideological forms because everything exists in a relationship with something else—for example, juridical ideology and the Marxist policy that would improve it. Althusser says that a Marxist policy about humanism that is based on a political attitude about humanism will be enacted—whether it is a rejection, a critique, a use, or a support—and “this policy will only have been possible on the absolute condition that it is based on Marxist philosophy, and a precondition for this is theoretical anti-humanism” (231). In other words, theoretical anti-humanism is the necessary pre-condition for any substantive Marxist policy that has anything to do with humanism. At first glance, this conclusion appears to be contradictory, but it is grounded in the necessity of knowing the truth about social reality before any successful policy regarding social reality can be implemented.

We saw in Chapter 2 exactly how Marxists have been trying to discover the humanist philosophy in Marx, not only in his early writings, but also in the writings that come after 1845. Their approach seems theoretical in the same way that Althusser’s approach is theoretical, and, thus, these are the Marxists Althusser is opposing. On his view, it is absolutely necessary to begin with Marx’s theoretical anti-humanism. The question becomes, at what point in reading Marx and elaborating a Marxist philosophy does one set aside theoretical anti-humanism to theorize Marxist-humanist ideology? When Althusser writes about the enactment of a Marxist policy about humanism, he is referring to a policy that is extrinsic to Marxist philosophy. Whatever humanist
conclusions are reached in the process of using Marxist philosophy in politics, we should not make the mistake of assuming that humanism is an intrinsic feature of the philosophy that created it. To use a crude example, if an economic policy that is praised for its humanistic appeal is enacted with the support of Marxist philosophy, it is no more correct to conclude that Marxist philosophy is humanistic than it would be to conclude that the hammer that built a house is part of that house.

However, it would be equally incorrect to assume that Marx’s writings post-1845 are perfectly scientific without a trace of ideology. Marxist philosophy is unique in that it identifies the ubiquity of ideology while realizing that Marxist philosophy itself is subject to ideological thinking. There are always gaps in the text, silences on certain issues that reveal ideological blindness.

Marx’s advance on Adam Smith, for example, is his ability to see the blanks of Smith’s discourse which betray its real significance. But Marx did not fully understand his own theoretical revolution, which is why his texts are themselves susceptible to a lecture symptomale, a sort of conceptual make-over practised by Althusser to bring out what was there all along, but insufficiently theorized.

(Davis, “Althusser on Reading and Self-reading” 302)

The fact of ideological blindness does not negate Marx’s scientific revolution in the philosophy of historical development. It would be rather strange to presuppose that ideology, as a primary factor in the development of history and the structure of societies, is (or should) be absent from the philosophy that identifies its pervasiveness. Instead, the ideological blindesses that obscure the truth in texts that aspire to be scientific are dealt
with through analysis by subsequent thinkers: “[t]he meaning of Smith is to be found in Marx, the meaning of Marx is to be found in Althusser, and the meaning of Althusser is also presumably to be found elsewhere” (302). Thus, even Althusser cannot be completely scientific and non-ideological in his reading of Marx, but the degree of scientificity about his (and Marx’s) work is greater than most, and we do not expect perfection to begin with.

Althusser is well aware of the ubiquity and necessity of ideology. He speaks of human societies that “secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life” (Althusser 232). Furthermore, he claims that only an ideological perspective could imagine the replacement of ideology with science in a Utopian future. Only an ideological imagination could perceive the possibility for the supersession of ethics by science or the destruction and replacement of religion with science. However, according to historical materialism, it is hard to believe that even a communist society could be free of ideological forms. These forms might be modified, converted, or recreated, but their presence would remain. For example, ideological forms such as “the scientific world outlook” or “communist humanism” could very well be the new ideology of a communist society because it is inconceivable “that communism, a new mode of production implying determinate forces of production and relations of production, could do without a social organization of production, and corresponding ideological forms” (232). Ideological forms are intrinsic to historical materialism, and so

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38 In characterizing this future world without ideology as “Utopian,” it is unclear if Althusser actually believes such a world is possible. Perhaps for him it is logically possible but nomologically impossible.
it is difficult to see how ideology could ever be absent in a society no matter what the mode of production happens to be.

Structuralism

How does the preceding discussion of the difference and function of ideology and science in Althusser’s theory relate to his structuralist philosophy? We have already seen that Althusser acknowledges the ideological blindness that exists in Marx’s writings, a blindness that is inevitable due to the nature of ideology. Therefore, there must be ideological blindness in Althusser’s writings as well, and it is in his structuralism that we can identify at least one of his blindspots. In positing historical materialism as the science of historical development, he removes individual human beings from the theory of history and society. This is not to say that human beings do not cause events to occur in history, but the causal role that humans play in history is determined only by social relations and the historical mode of production. Therefore, the only phenomena that can truly be said to determine historical development are non-human; indeed, humans are removed from the explanation in a theoretical anti-humanism that views them as subjects through whom the mode of production and all of its consequent ideological forms are expressed. Absent from this theory is any role to be played by humans as individual agents based on either individual rationality or the much longer history of evolution and biological development.

Before we turn to the problems with Althusser’s structuralism, we should elaborate on what structuralism looks like and how it functions. The term “structure” originally referred to a property of an object and was a part of how the object is
constructed. Structure, according to this definition, “was an abstract property of something else: something possessed by something else” (Assiter 274). For example, a building can be understood to have a structure, but this structure, as a property of the building, is not synonymous with the building. The building and the structure are “instantiated in the same object” (274). This definition is a good starting point for understanding structuralism, but the relationship of structure to object needs to be reversed. Structuralists are concerned with how the structure dominates the individual elements that make up the object, as opposed to an atomistic approach that studies individual elements and views the whole structure as no more than a summary of the parts in total. This view lacks the determining power the structural whole has over the individual parts through the predominance of elemental interconnectivity.

The proper study of science, then, is the structure that all systems possess. A structural science is interested in identifying “morphological” or “structural” laws that determine the appearance and operation of a system. Thus, the scientific investigation is synchronic in nature, and while the dynamic or the diachronic are important in their own right, structuralists claim that these factors are “wholly complementary to synchronic analysis” (Assiter 275). So, structuralism is primarily concerned with “co-existence,” not change. Depending on one’s theoretical orientation, a structural analysis that does not easily accommodate explanations of change is problematical.39 But for structuralism, what is most important is explaining the way in which the whole is producing (or

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39 Most structuralists would probably disagree with the claim that structuralism cannot deal with diachronic change, hence the attention that the structure-agency problem receives in structuralist literature by theorists such as Anthony Giddens or Pierre Bourdieu. I will argue, however, that structuralism does in fact have a problem accounting for systemic change when I deal with Althusser’s sociological reductionism.
reproducing) the parts of the system. Implicit in this description of structuralism is the fact that structure is not intuitively perceived. Thus, a science of structuralism is required in order to identify “the real [structures] which underlie the appearances, and which are usually opaque to the eye” (275).

This is a good description of Althusser’s structuralist approach to Marxist philosophy, and it raises the question of the capacity of his theory to adequately explain dynamism within historical materialism. Nancy DiTomaso has made a strong argument about Althusser’s sociological reductionism by comparing his theories with those of Talcott Parsons, both of whom used natural science models to explain sociological phenomena. In addition, “[t]hey both wanted to challenge the atomism and empiricism which they felt were the bases for most social theories . . . they both wanted to rid social theory of methodological individualism, and hence, of psychological reductionism” (DiTomaso 15). Psychological reductionism, with its exclusionary focus on the individual mind, qualifies as one of the empiricist, humanist philosophies that find in the human individual an essence according to which social reality is produced. Marxist philosophy—particularly, Althusser’s theoretical anti-humanist brand—provides the perfect opposition to such a view by focusing on the non-human factors in a specific mode of production that reproduces social reality. But in opposing the atomistic narrowness of methodological individualism, Althusser makes an over-correction by replacing the autonomous rational agent with the subject of a structural totality. And, “[b]ecause these theoretical conceptualizations do not enable one to specify the limits of structural effect . . . they are ‘sociologically reductionist’” (14).
According to DiTomaso, theoretical reduction comes in two forms, “(a) the replacement of one theory by a closely related and more comprehensive theory, where the second specifies the conditions of applicability of the first, or (b) the absorption of one theory into a more inclusive or comprehensive theory, where the second replaces the first” (DiTomaso 14). Theoretical reduction is an important aspect of any scientific methodology, and thus the first example of reduction where a related theory modifies another is appropriate. However, the second form of reduction is, on DiTomaso’s view, inappropriate because of “the arbitrary reduction of all social phenomena to the level of structure” (15). This means that any phenomenon that is non-structural cannot be social. What DiTomaso has in mind here is the “erroneous theoretical closure” that sociologists and structuralists apply to the premise that social structure produces human behavior. Beyond the social nature of human beings, structuralist sociologists over-emphasize socialization, and without an alternative for the production of human behavior, structuralists (including Althusser) inevitably cross over into the theoretical territory of sociological determinism. And, while the principle of determinism itself is not in question here, the fact that the determinism is exclusively structural-social is a problem.

At issue is the determinism of reproduction within the social structure, the way in which already existing social forms are continuously replicated by subjects caught up in the inertia of the system. Production—designated as the creative, structure-independent action of subjects—is as deterministic as reproduction, but at least the inclusion of production allows for a more comprehensive and accurate explanation of social life. Through reproduction, there is an elimination of “a negative element in the effects that
structure can have on individuals, and it ‘flattens out’ the tension between society and the person” (DiTomaso 22). In other words, according to the structure of a particular society, subjective existence will be determined by a “unidirectional” relationship between structure and subject. Therefore, “while rejecting mechanical determinism . . . Althusser construct[s] an analogous social determinism” (22). For DiTomaso, the issue is with both problems of determinism and structure-agency. She assumes, as many sociologists do, that causal complexity (or overdetermination) automatically introduces a degree of subjective freedom into the system. ⁴⁰ But determinism, as an insoluble problem, distracts from the important issue of causal complexity vis-à-vis determinism.

We have already seen that Althusser’s structural theory of historical materialism eliminates non-structural explanations from historical development, especially the non-structural empiricism of the human individual. However, this elimination happens in theory only; there remains the question of the causal significance of social phenomena that resist structural classification. DiTomaso says that,

although random empirical behavior is not theoretically part of the system, if such behavior leads to major structural changes, then it is interpreted as the structure itself which ‘made way’ (or created a ‘niche’) for the behavior. In other words, it is assumed that the structure, in theory, is always already constituted of the social conditions which arise within it. That is, behavior may be random, but if ‘selected,’ it was structurally determined. (DiTomaso 23)

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⁴⁰ “Overdetermination” is an important concept for Althusser as well, and although it is not directly applied to the structure-agency problem, perhaps we could find, arising from overdetermination, subjective freedom arising from the site of conflict within contradiction.
Again, we are confronted with the problem of sociological reductionism in the pursuit of theoretical closure. The reason for the reductionism, at least in Althusser’s philosophy, is the insistence that “humanism” be expunged from theoretical practice, the result being a one-dimensional, exclusively sociological theory that inadequately explains human behavior and structural-social change. DiTomaso claims that the reason for this one-dimensionality is an “[unwillingness] to leave ‘open’ spaces” (26). Unpredictable social behavior is left unexplained, and there is an assumption that, eventually, theoretical closure will be achieved.

Structuralist sociologists “assume that social conditions explain all of social behavior, while ignoring psychological predispositions, moral choice, anthropological needs, biological limits, and so on” (DiTomaso 26). These categories are humanistic in nature and have no place in Althusser’s theoretical anti-humanism. But, as we saw in Chapter 1, humanistic categories of biological limits and psychological predispositions are real phenomena that exist—to some degree—indepen
dently in relation to social life and its structuration. DiTomaso is probably too reserved when she includes “biological limits” in her list of non-structural phenomena. The biological existence of human beings is more than a negative space providing a peripheral boundary for the possible field of subjective experience and human behavior. On the contrary, it allows for something like subjective, instinctual experience and the behaviors that arise from this experience.

Where does this leave Althusser’s science of historical materialism? I will not address the possibility of integrating historical materialism with the natural and biological sciences, although I will suggest that what seems to be an unbridgeable gap between
Althusser’s structuralism and the biological sciences is mostly an illusion. Althusser opposes theorizing human beings as concrete givens in the world and orienting a theory of historical development around them. But, there is a difference between the Marxian notion of “the essence of man” and the concept of “human nature” put forth by the biological and evolutionary sciences. The former is based in ideology, whereas the latter is a result of scientific investigation. As a supporter of scientific practice, one might wonder why Althusser would be resistant to the existence and function of human nature to begin with. Perhaps the only thing that sets Marxist philosophy apart from biological and evolutionary science is a definitional misunderstanding. Insofar as “the essence of man” is a product of ideology, it is appropriate (scientifically) to dismiss it as a real object of Marxist philosophy. However, we should not make the mistake of assuming that there is a direct analogy to be drawn between this ideological concept and the scientific concept of human nature.

Universalism

In conclusion, I would like to spend a few pages on universalism, the foundation for transhistoricism and transculturalism. Althusser is a universalist in at least one sense; he believes that Marxist philosophy—constituted as a science—has a permanent truth value and applicability independent of the culture or historical moment in which it is discovered or used. In his juxtaposition of Althusser with Sartre, Gregory Elliott has argued that “Marxist philosophy was not, as Sartre supposed, ‘the philosophy of our time,’ unsurpassable . . . [i]t was a scientific discipline with its own object, theory and method, destined to outlive the moment of its birth and autonomous of any historical
consciousness” (Elliott 91). Althusser’s affirmation of this aspect of science should not be surprising considering the role science plays in his theoretical practice. A universalist philosophy is also necessary for a Marxist (if one follows Althusser) because it supports the idea that the analysis Marx brings to particular modes of production will be applicable in all situations, thus allowing for unification in the sphere of revolutionary politics. To know that Marxist philosophy is true is to know that it is universal, and Althusser’s Marxist theory is founded on (and depends upon) this presupposition.

However, Althusser’s universalism is limited to the truth and applicability of Marxist philosophy. Regarding particular cultures and societies existing in history, Althusser says nothing of their shared characteristics beyond Marxian concepts of labor, economy, and mode of production. Again comparing Althusser with Sartre, Elliott claims that Sartre could not explain history and society scientifically because his starting point is the free agency of persons. For Althusser, “[m]en were not the constitutive subjects of history, but constituted subjects in history—agents subsumed under, and allotted their places/functions by an ensemble of social structures (economic, political and ideological) anterior and exterior to them, governed by their own peculiar laws” (Elliott 63).

Whatever the peculiar circumstances each society might exhibit, the economic, political, and ideological production will function in the same structural way, although the content of the structure can be (and is) different for each society. Demonstrating the uniqueness of such circumstances, Althusser says,

we all have to be born some day, somewhere, and begin thinking and writing in a given world. For a thinker, this world is immediately the world of the living
thoughts of his time, the ideological world where he is born into thought. For Marx, this world was the world of the German ideology of the 1830s and 1840s, dominated by the problems of German idealism, and by what has been given the abstract name of the ‘decomposition of Hegel.’ (Althusser 74)

The “given world” is the particular constitution of a society existing in history, and “the living thoughts of his time” indicates the disjunction in structural content spanning historical time. Marx exemplifies this principle in that, as the great innovator of the science of history, he was himself born into, and thought according to, the German ideology that had been formed around him by Hegel. The science of historical materialism and the analytical method of Marxist philosophy would always remain the same because the process of historical development that is their object was not created by them—it was discovered as already existing independent of the scientific knowledge of it. However, it is not at all clear that Marx would have developed the necessary theoretical practice that allowed him to make these discoveries if he had been born into a different time and place. We cannot say what might have been, but it might very well be the case that the predominance of Hegel and German idealism made possible Marx’s scientific revolution.

Althusser is not alone in conceiving of history and cultures as discontinuous at the level of content. He is firmly within the tradition of 20th century anthropology, of which the structuralist Levi-Strauss is a major proponent and from whom Althusser derives his

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41 This is more of a logical conclusion than an evidential one. Althusser never clearly states a position on historical or cultural difference at the level of content, most likely because he is writing on the structural level of societies and historical and cultural difference are simply not his focus.
structural analysis. Donald Brown, an anthropologist himself, has dedicated much work to identifying the tendency in 20th century anthropology to focus on historical, cultural, and human difference at the expense of similarity, continuity, and universality. Between the years 1915 and 1934, the field of anthropology codified three assumptions about human difference, “that culture is a distinct kind of phenomenon that cannot be reduced to others (in particular, not to biology or psychology), that culture (rather than our physical nature) is the fundamental determinant of human behavior, and that culture is largely arbitrary” (Brown 6). Because culture determines human behavior, and because culture cannot be reduced to biological or psychological limitations or predispositions, these factors can be summarily eliminated in favor of the exclusive study of cultural phenomena. Naturally, this focus had the effect of magnifying “difference” as a cardinal anthropological principle because, beyond the category of speciation, there is no solid link between peoples of distinct cultures. Intercultural contact and influence could still be operating to bring about some similarities, but at this superficial level the effect cannot be significant enough to explain the actual similarities that unite humanity.

In the latter half of the 19th century, E. B. Tylor, the founder of academic anthropology, demonstrated the similarities that exist between all human peoples. However, his theory of universalism was tied up with racial biases; he viewed culture as something that people had more or less of depending on their intelligence, and therefore, ethno-centric judgments about the value of non-European cultures carried an automatic judgment about inferior levels of intelligence. In response to Tylor, anthropologists in the 20th century began to define cultural difference based on particular historical
circumstances and the internal evolution of cultures. Franz Boas, one of the most important American anthropologists, claimed that cultures could not be compared to each other; individual cultures had to be studied on their own terms, each one perceived according to its own peculiar social forms. According to Brown, Boas and his contemporaries were motivated by their concern regarding racism.

In the early decades of this century the eugenics movements and other trends had succeeded in, among other things, incorporating racist criteria into U.S. immigration laws. Boas and many other anthropologists took vigorous steps to employ anthropology to combat racism . . . This mixture of antiracist morality with cultural relativism—the view that each culture must be judged in its own terms—remains a potent force to the present. (Brown 55)

Boas personally believed that human universals existed, but he also thought it was important to emphasize cultural difference in order to minimize the influence of racial prejudices in social life and public policy.

Boas’s student, Alfred Kroeber, continued this trend in cultural anthropology by arguing that cultures are “superorganic” phenomena that cannot be explained in psychological or biological terms. He claimed that cultural anthropology, as a matter of history, has different aims and methods than that of the physical sciences and thus these fields are irreconcilable. According to Kroeber, the study of cultures is exclusively historical as opposed to scientific, and “the material studied by history is not man, but his works” (qtd. in Brown 56). This is a striking claim, that anthropology should not be concerned with humanity itself but only with the artifacts humanity produces. By
eliminating the empiricism of the subject of history, Althusser is echoing Kroeber in another field. These are the men who were integral to the great structuralist revolution in 20th century anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. But, as Brown comments, “[t]rying to understand human culture and society divorced from the problem of trying to understand flesh-and-blood people [can] only produce a blinkered, one-armed kind of anthropology, still able to function but at a considerable handicap” (56).

The empirical method of anthropology became dedicated to describing unique characteristics of peoples in remote cultures. Margaret Mead’s infamous study of youths growing up in Samoa perpetuated the idea that young Samoans do not experience the stress and sexual turmoil that Western youths do. Behaviorism was coming into fashion with the idea that human beings are blank slates upon which culture inscribes personality, dispositions, preferences, and behavior. The dictum that social facts define social facts was supported by sociologists such as Emile Durkheim who argued that “the ‘substratum’ of social facts . . . is society or various groups within it” (Brown 60). He observed that supposed innate tendencies like paternal love or sexual jealousy were sometimes lacking in certain persons, and therefore the reasons for these tendencies could not be psychological or biological.42 Again, these anti-humanistic views are very similar to Althusser’s. As Brown points out, “[a]lthough it does not go uncontested in Marxist writings, nor even in Marx’s writings, the ‘official’ Marxist position is that there is no

42 I use this example from Durkheim only for the purpose of characterizing the sociological view, and I will not provide a detailed refutation here. However, I will say briefly that the lack of these dispositions could be (at least in part) influenced or even caused by biological factors. One need only read a portion of the vast biological literature dedicated to describing abnormal biological development to understand how much influence biological development has on a person’s disposition.
universal human nature, only the various human natures determined by specific historical-material conditions” (60).

Undoubtedly, the reasons for the tendency toward relativism in cultural anthropology as well as sociology and philosophy are more complicated and diverse than political agendas and willful theoretical blindness. However, it is not my intention to bring resolution to this debate, nor do I think I am capable of such a task. My only goal is to put forth a principle according to which anthropologists, sociologists, and Marxist philosophers can bring more clarity to their theories. This principle is described by Brown in five theses. The first is that human universals exist, and they are necessary and valuable for any study of humanity. Second, human universals are not exclusively a product of human nature; many can be a result of cultural conventions that have come to be distributed universally. Third, the study of human universals is largely tabooed in the social sciences and humanities, and insofar as this is the case, it is a hindrance to a proper understanding of human life and experience. Fourth, human biology must be part of the understanding of universal human nature. Finally, evolutionary science and psychology provide the fundamental basis for such an understanding.

Championing the virtues of evolutionary biology and psychology for the study of humanity is not sufficient for most scholars in the social sciences and humanities—their value must be discovered on their own terms. However, we can dispel at least one theoretical objection that is routinely raised by opponents of universalism. According to the counter argument, all that is required to disprove universalism is a single exception to

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43 These theses can be found on pages 5 and 6 of Brown’s *Human Universals*. In addition, he includes an appendix that lists over a hundred characteristics that humans share universally.
the rule. If one person in the world can be found who does not laugh, then laughter cannot be considered a universally shared human trait. I would argue that this objection misses the point because human universals are not necessarily about the instantiation of a certain characteristic in every single individual but, rather, the capacity and potential that every human individual has to experience or express such characteristics. Brown gives an example that is highly instructive.

The dog, for example, was absent from some cultures, probably less than 5 percent of those known to ethnography. If, however, it had spread everywhere, what difference would it make in our understanding the dog-human relationship? If some people really did get along without fire—and it is possible that some branches of early Homo sapiens did not have it—we wouldn't understand the uses of fire or its apparent universality any the less. (44)

What these “near universals” demonstrate is that accidents of nature, biology, culture, or society do not render universalism unintelligible. It is the reverse claim that is incoherent, the notion that a miniscule aberration in the instantiation of a characteristic somehow proves the rule that humans are irreconcilably different.

Furthermore, because of their emphasis on phenomenal traits or objects, opponents of universalism forget to consider the importance of conditional universals. For example, a claim like “all societies possessing paved highways possess centralized government” expresses a universal relationship between roads and governments. It is true that not all societies have paved roads or governments, and thus these would not

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44 This example and others can be found in chapter 2 of Brown’s *Human Universals*. 
qualify as universal characteristics of human societies. But this is only a limited view of the relationship between paved roads and governments, and perhaps this limited perspective is responsible for the idea that universalism does not exist. Nor does the “difference” perspective properly account for capacities and potentials. Some peoples might have an elementary number system, and so we could say that having a number representation for 1 million is not a universal. However, having a representation of the number and possessing the ability to count to this number are different. Also, the ability to recognize that a universal exists has nothing to do with the actual existence of the universal. As Brown points out, “it would be an unusual linguist who would say that if a people does not have a conception of grammar they or their language has no grammar . . . if it is there it is there, whether the natives are aware of it or not” (Brown 49).\footnote{This demonstrates the difference between etic and emic accounts of cultural phenomena. Etic universals, “by analogy with phonetic analysis in linguistics, refers to analyses in terms of cross-culturally valid, scientific frameworks (universalistic frameworks)” (Brown 48). Emic universals, “by analogy with phonemic analysis, refers to the way the natives conceptualize things” (48).}

In one sense, Brown’s universalism is compatible with Althusser’s Marxist philosophy. Historical materialism is universally applicable across history and cultures because its elements are thoroughly scientific. Although he would undoubtedly disagree with Brown on the issues of human nature, humanism, and the scientific exploration of both, Althusser does value the universalist principle—and, so do the Marxist humanists in that they wish to place humanity at the center of Marxist philosophy and propose universal solutions for our alienation. It would appear that the deepest conflict between the natural scientist, the Marxist-humanist, and the Marxist anti-humanist is how they define “human nature.” I have been arguing that all three of these groups have been
defining this concept differently, and the semantic confusion has led to misunderstanding of both human nature and the individual projects of Marxism and evolutionary biology and psychology. If we are ever going to achieve a better understanding of what makes us who we are, then we must begin by clarifying what human nature actually is.
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