

On the Relationship Between Aristotle's Essentialist view of Human Nature and Historiography

(How does the Kitten Become a Cat?)

These notes are based on Scott Meikle's Book, *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx* (Open Court Publishing Coy., Illinois, 1985).

Key Words

Essentialism: Theory of the essence of an entity or organism means the characteristics that make it the particular kind of thing it is; not to be understood on the basis of surface appearance alone, but also including its hidden contradictions.

Teleology: Theory of an organism's development from immature, to mature and a declining form; how its characteristic behaviour or function (ergon) is to be explained in a law-like fashion (cf. laws of nature, e.g. gravity, etc.) Two further factors need to be considered:

Necessary development = the organism should be able to reach its full potential or final goal (Telos).

Telos: Firstly, the development of the organism is a contradictory process; i.e. dialectical. However an organism's necessary development can be interrupted, prevented altogether by accidents. Secondly, 'A whole entity can be anything from an amoeba to a form of human society, or an astronomical system.' (Meikle)

Historiography: The science of writing history.

Theme

The struggle between two opposing schools of thought in philosophy - essentialism and atomism.

Background

Marx's view that a new form of society is born in the womb of the old one is derived from the 'Aristotelian tradition'. Anti-marxists argue about the wrongness of Marx's materialist theory of history and the naturalness of market economy. This has a long antecedence, dating back to the classical political economists, who were Marx's starting point. What he found in Adam Smith, et al were the categories required for a materialist version of Hegel's idealist theory of history. But he also found in the former an anti-Aristotelian, anti-organicist, 'ungenetical' form (as he later puts it in his 'Theories of Surplus Value'), i.e. atomistic philosophy. Atomism is the antithesis of Aristotle (= atomistic small-bits that combine and repel in a void). Therefore Marx begins to reconstruct the categories of political economy on an Aristotelian and essentialist basis in his Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (844). He rehabilitates the Aristotelian tradition and at the same time links Aristotle's theory of human nature with a materialist historiography.

From Aristotle to Hegel and Marx

Aristotle's essentialism stands in opposition to atomism and individualism, or the idea that everything is reducible to its basic constituents, e.g. atoms or individual units which make up the whole. Whereas essentialism conceives of organic wholes. Despite its complexity of form, the whole cannot be reducible to the sum of its parts.

At the same time, we have to distinguish between essence and appearance. It is impossible to conceive of reality only in terms of appearance, without analysing the hidden elements beneath the surface of things, including their contradictory movement. Whereas the former may be verifiable by means of physical evidence, the latter cannot. It requires mediation of thought; it may become explicable by means of a logical proof. Yet it is only the hidden elements which can provide us with a complete understanding of reality.

Of course, Aristotle used the concept of essentialism only with regard to nature, not human society. So when he uses the word organism, he is referring to biological entities, not social entities. It is also the basis for scientific socialism's understanding of the processes of the natural world (c.f. atomism).

It enables us to analyse a particular organism, including its development from its immature form towards maturity. The latter may be defined as the full realisation of its species potential. In his book, 'Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx', Scott Meikle uses the analogy of the kitten which is expected to develop into a cat. But can adherents of Marx's scientific socialism extend the notion of the organism to human society itself? Can we regard the human species as an organism, including the way in which it organises its relationship with the rest of nature, via different modes of production? This means that we must also bring history into the equation.

Classical Marxism holds to the theory that fundamentally Marx is an essentialist. It is the basis of all his thought. Therefore he constructs the notion of the evolution of human society. (N.B. Evolution itself proceeds by means of sudden, contradictory turns; the future dominant world species is already developing in the shadow of the existing one, e.g. mammals were already in existence during the age of the dinosaurs, prior to the latter's extinction, sudden or otherwise. This is a dialectical view of nature.) Hence Marx theorises the evolution of human society, dialectically, based on a mode of production for the survival and development of the species: from primitive communism to slavery, feudalism, capitalism and finally socialism, as the precursor of communism. Under communism man is able to realise his species potential. Such a development is the necessary condition for man to become fully human. That is his telos. But this is not guaranteed; it is not part of some divine plan.

In accordance with Aristotelian dialectics (continuity v. discontinuity, supersession), we have to distinguish between a potential for change, which is inherent within the organism's essential nature, and the erroneous notion of inevitable outcomes.

1. Aristotle in his *Politics*, introduces the method of looking for the general in the particular, for the underlying essence and the forms through which it develops, culminating in the point or telos of each form. In Chapter 2 of Aristotle's *Politics*, we see an essentialist theory of the origin of the state (see pp 508-509, tutor's handout). In passing he says that the state exists by nature and that nature itself is its end; 'the coming into existence of any object, that is what we call its nature - of man for instance, or a horse', etc. The aim of its end is 'perfection'. Hence in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, Ch. 13 (pp 374 -5) Aristotle outlines the condition for human happiness, which is that man must fulfil his ergon, the function of his soul, in accordance with the rational principle; the irrational or the 'desiring element' must be persuaded by reason to serve the rational, presently demonstrated in music, e.g. by the lute player.

2. Meikle notes that In *NE*, 5,5, Aristotle 'shows clearly the penetrative power of essentialist categories and method, ...among other things it brought him closer to an understanding of money than any author until the 19th century.' In his own way, he identifies the growth and origin of circuits C-C, C-M-C, M-C-M and M-M, culminating in a new form of circulation of goods and the appearance of money. According to the Aristotelian scholar, Sir David Ross, for each form, Aristotle speaks about its 'necessary development from its previous form'. Therefore each form may be considered to have its own object, high point or telos. But the aim of the third circuit, M-C-M, is different, because it is concerned only with the getting of money, and that only by that method can we have an exchange of goods... 'Money is the beginning and end of this exchange'; 'there is no end to the limit it seeks'; the end it seeks is wealth...the mere acquisition of money. 'All of this, and a good deal more, is quoted by Marx in *Capital*'. Thus he found good reason to 'go back to the great investigator who was the first to analyse the value form, like so many other forms of thought, society and nature. I mean Aristotle.'

3. Aristotle presents the view that society is a natural growth, albeit along dialectical lines. But this view is contradicted by the atomist-analytical view of society, viz., that the latter is merely 'an aggregation of individuals who 'choose' to live together rather than alone. This is the conception that underlies all modern contractualarian theorists of the

bourgeois epoch from Hobbes onwards.’ Therefore what we see is the translation of Aristotle’s essentialism into its opposite, atomism. Whereas the essential strand of contractualarian thinking (= some kind of agreement between the rulers and the ruled) about the origin and nature of the state was not a creation of the modern world. It can be seen in the work of the ancients, e.g. Plato’s Republic. In Plato’s time, the commonplace view was that the basis of the state was one of co-operation among individuals; which in turn is the way to the more efficient supply of physical goods, ‘food...dwelling...clothing and the like’. Therefore the telos of human association (or the state) is ‘the higher provision of the good life’, the means to the realisation of ‘the potentialities inherent in the essence of man’.

(Meikle) However, for Aristotle, of course, this also meant an unequal ‘association formed by men with these two, women and slaves’. (Politics, ch. 2)

4. Scientific History: In his Poetics, Aristotle appears to privilege poetry over history, because poetry ‘speaks rather of the general, history...of the particular. But as Meikle says, this does not mean that Aristotle believed a scientific history was impossible; rather that historians had not yet thought of it. Like poetry, such a history would not speak of the particular; but of the generality in the particular. ‘The general is honoured because it reveals the cause.’ To know the cause, we must look for the general in the line of necessity, which is ‘possible only in relation to an identifiable whole, in whose development or movement according to its nature (ergon) the necessity lies’.

5. Hegel’s philosophy of history is informed by Aristotle’s categories. In his conception of the historical process, he comes close to that of Marx. So he left Marx little more to do than the task of adjustment on Hegel’s work in order to arrive at his own theory.

In his Philosophy of History, Hegel’s adopts 3 Aristotelian positions :

(a) Chance is not the basis of phenomena. (b) ‘A principle, a law, is something implicit, which is not completely real (actual)...not yet in reality...a possibility.’ (c) The phenomena of history arise from the whole organism or essence, which undergoes transformation of form, and has an end or telos. The telos of world history for Hegel is ‘freedom of the spirit’ or the ‘actualisation of freedom’, which is the ‘final purpose of the world.’

Necessity = the line of development in which man's nature realises that potential. Hegel's view of history is 'the union of freedom and necessity', in which reason achieves its apogee. On the one hand, we have the inner (unconscious) development of the spirit; on the other, it ends with the freedom contained in men's conscious volitions; albeit in relation to what is necessary, such as the satisfaction of human needs, man's response to natural change, etc.

On this basis, like the natural organism, world history passes through stages. But as in nature, accidents can happen which frustrate the organism's completion; an accident frustrates the realisation of potentials. (Meikle gives the example of the kitten which is run over as it crosses the road. Therefore it is unable to realise its potential to grow into a cat, the latter being its telos or final goal.)

6. Marx's task is to 'set Hegel on his feet': He seeks to transpose Hegel into the form of Aristotelian materialism without losing what Hegel had gained. What is wrong with Hegel, and what is needed to put him right, is to replace his idealist starting point with a materialist one. So for Marx the concrete is the real starting point of history. Hence human social labour is the essence of all socio-historical forms: economic, political, cultural, etc. These forms cohere into social organisms. each has a nature which develops of necessity, in accordance with its nature, along a certain line, unless its is obstructed dramatically. The development of that fundamental essence is the historical process, and its telos is communism (or the society of freely associated producers). Communism is the telos of the development of human beings, because it is part of their natural species being.

How is this to be achieved? Answer: The proletariat. It is the class which develops out of the capitalist mode of production (i.e. within the womb of the existing society). But it differs from all other exploited classes in history, because it is ' a class...which has radical chains, a class in civil society which is not of civil society, a class..., because its sufferings are universal..., which is a total loss of humanity and which can only redeem itself by a total redemption of humanity.' (See Marx & Engels, *The German Ideology*, 1846)

However, in order to achieve the latter, i.e. usher in the new socialist society (precursor of communism), even if the conditions are ripe for the necessary transformation of society into this final epoch in human history (N.B. the epoch which marks the beginning of real, unfettered history), the revolutionary class must first become conscious of this task. As Marx says, it is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence. It is their social existence which determines their consciousness. On the other hand, he also wrote that man makes his own history, but not under conditions of his own choosing. The attainment of adequate consciousness cannot be measured with the 'accuracy of physical science'. This is because things can go wrong. Therefore the 'final cause' is not guaranteed.

Man makes his own history, albeit with or without adequate consciousness. The next stage in the development of human society depends on his consciousness. But this may become blocked by the material conditions of his own making, which are the basis of man's own 'mind-forged manacles'. Under capitalism, Marx identified the following categories: alienated labour; commodity fetishism; the division of labour. As for the latter, in order to maximise the accumulation of capital, the capitalist requires a fundamental division between practical and intellectual labour; and within the intellectual sphere we also see a further division, fragmentation of knowledge into specialisms. Finally there is the culture industry - a secular alternative to religious belief - i.e. image-based mass entertainment - because the masses are so tired and stultified by alienated labour they need to be distracted, etc. (N.B. The culture industry, like the permanent arms economy, is also another means for using up surplus capital...)

Today, this man-made block manifests itself in the discontented, emptied-out individual (Adorno's subjectless subject). Modern man is uncomfortable with his alienated state, but nevertheless he sees capitalism as the only alternative. It is the natural order of things! But can he really have faith in the ability of the capitalist class, his own leaders, bourgeois democracy, etc. to solve the great problems, which are of their own making, and which threaten the future of humanity: e.g. over-production, the growing gap between rich and poor, destruction of the environment, through deforestation, pollution,

etc.; global warming, for which man may have some responsibility (or is entirely responsible, according to some).

7. To reiterate an earlier point, as in nature, accidents can happen which frustrate the organism's development. But where does the accident fit into human history, i.e. the obstruction which frustrates the human organism's realisation of its potential? Answer: It is humanity's failure to seize the historical opportunity to give birth to the new socialist, communist society, for which the necessary conditions of its existence already exist (see above)? In concrete terms, it could be argued that this accident occurred in 1917: The inevitable outcome of imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism is war. Out of this came the Russian Revolution. But it was immediately blown off course by the imperialist counterrevolution, COMBINED WITH the defeat of the proletarian revolutions which broke out in the developed countries of western Europe. As the Bolshevik leaders themselves predicted, unless the revolution spread, especially to advanced capitalist countries, then it could not survive or become seriously deformed. The defence of the Revolution in the Civil War of 1918-21 exhausted Soviet Russia's small, but highly conscious proletariat. The weight of the backward peasantry began to exert an enormous pressure on an increasingly isolated Bolshevik party. Within a few years, the dictatorship of the proletariat and the peasantry degenerated into its opposite, the dictatorship of the party, overseen by the Cheka or secret police.

In 1921, in a desperate bid to hold the line, in the hopes that the revolution in the west might finally succeed, Lenin introduced the New Economic policy. Whilst this was intended to regenerate the Soviet economy, then on its last legs, at the same time, almost overnight, NEP produced a fast-growing bureaucracy. By definition, the latter's function is to ration society's scarce resources, whilst creaming off a meagre surplus for its self. This was the quid pro quo for running the economy. Upon Lenin's death, Stalin seized control of the party. Whereas Lenin, Trotsky and Lunacharsky saw all of the above measures as a temporary necessity, Stalin turned these into a lasting virtue. By late 1924 the stage was set for another volte face -

Stalin substituted the erroneous doctrine of 'socialism in one country' for the international revolution. He argued that it was possible for the Soviet Union to build a socialist society and communism on its own. In reality Stalin reintroduced a more brutal form of nationalism or Great Russian chauvinism. He became the new Tzar and went on to murder more of his own people than fascism. The poisonous legacy of this terrible Stalinist past continues to blight the present. For the foreseeable future humanity has rejected communism. Meanwhile the capitalist system, imperialism, has entered the period of its own decline. The 'war on terror' is a symptom. As Marx once said: 'either socialism or barbarism'. Thus for Russia, the world proletariat and humanity itself, all three have paid a high price.

Thus, given all of the above, can the kitten still become a cat?