

## HUMAN NATURE FROM A LIFE-GROUNDED PERSPECTIVE

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### Summary

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

### 1. Introduction

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

live.” ? Does to “live” mean “maintain basic biological functions” in common with non-human animals? Or does it mean to develop the capacities for self-creation that constitute truly human life?

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

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

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

The argument can be summarized as follows. The history of philosophical reflection on the nature of human being is contradictory in so far as it confuses critical and ideological conceptions. The critical conception of human nature understands humanity as irreducible to the predicates (specific identities) that define it at a given time. Ideological conceptions, on the other hand, reduce human being to some one set of predicates (particular identity) that characterize some segment of it at a given moment. These two conceptions have contradictory implications. The critical element, the capacity to change given social structures, is the foundation for criticizing given states of affairs as unjust. Ideological conceptions, on the other hand, are always strategies of justifying injustice. Postmodern critique of all concepts of human nature as nothing but the ruses of social power seeking to legitimate itself overlooks this crucial distinction. Because it fails to note this essential distinction it falls victim to the contradiction that it

cannot ground its own concern for the well-being of the oppressed whose interests it purports to champion. The life-grounded conception of human nature understands the dynamic elements of human nature as organic capacities of the human being for individuation and interprets well-being as the social conditions in which those capacities can be developed to their widest possible scope.

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

### **2.1. The Classical Age: Plato and Aristotle**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

to give him a drug ... if anyone prescribes for him a long course of treatment ... he hastily says ... that such a life of preoccupation with his illness and neglect of his work ... isn't worth living." In summation, the critical moment of Plato's theory of human nature emphasizes its neediness, its capacity for learning and self-government, and the essential link between socially meaningful work and individually meaningful life. It thus establishes standards for the evaluation of social formations. Where individuals are slothful or immoderate the fault lies not in the 'nature' of the individuals but in the social institutions in which they have been educated. This conception of human nature is critical in so far as it implies that everyone is capable of educated to growth towards the universally good and consciously realizing it the contributions that they make to social well-being. Social problems are not caused by individual 'natural' flaws but poorly organized social institutions.

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

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

The ideological moment, like the critical, also functions as a principle according to which society and individual life may be judged, but its implications are the opposite. The ideological moment, while critical of Athenian democracy, presupposes rather than criticizes the normative hierarchies central to Greek society, especially the belief that those who were in fact slaves were slaves 'by nature.' The ideological moment of the theory of human nature naturalizes rather than criticizes social hierarchies by arguing that people are naturally sorted into types distinguished from each other by fixed

differences in the quality of potential for achievement. Its effect is to bar the way to social change governed by the value of expanding the scope of capacity realization for everyone. Charitably interpreted, the critical moment, by contrast, implies that what individuals are able to achieve is a function not of naturally differentiated potential but the experiences that they have while young. Equal education, according to the critical moment, satisfies the material condition for equal achievement. The critical moment understands human beings according to their equal potential to *develop into* different ways of living. The ideological moment *reduces* human beings to the specific occupation that they find themselves performing. In the latter case what one does is read as a sign of what one is naturally capable of doing. In the former, what one does is understood as what one has been educated to do. The later conception holds out the hope that changed social institutions can expand the life-horizons of those citizens whose life-activity is unsatisfying. The former conception tries to ensure stasis by convincing citizens that what they find themselves doing is what they are naturally fit to do. While Aristotle represents an epochal development of a critical understanding of human nature, he too ultimately falls victim to the contradiction that besets Plato's theory.

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

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

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

the development of the material conditions for) the realization of their proper good. In both cases the life of those living beings is governed by the goal of realizing to the fullest the immanent potentials encoded in their form.

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

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

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

When, however, the focus shifts from the abstract account of human potentiality to the actual structure of citizenship in Aristotle’s political theory, we see the emergence of an ideological moment in the conception of human nature that contradicts the political implications of the critical moment. When it comes to determining the extension of the category of citizenship Aristotle retreats from the critical implications of his understanding of the best human life. In line with the culturally predominant belief system of his day, Aristotle not only approves of slavery and the exclusion of women from citizenship, he employs his metaphysics to justify both forms of oppression. In so doing he converts a historically contingent social prejudice into a metaphysical

necessity. As he argues in his *Politics* “it is clear that the rule of the soul over the body ... is natural and expedient ... the same holds good of animals in relation to man ... [and, in relation to male and female] the male is by nature superior and the female inferior ... this same principle, of necessity, extends to all mankind ... the lower sort are by nature slaves.” The contradiction here takes the same form as in Plato. According to the critical moment, human nature is able to develop those capabilities for which its education has prepared it. In other words, social institutions are responsible for the development of ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ forms of life. When it comes to women and slaves, however, nature itself is now posited as the cause of their inferiority. The contradiction is even sharper in Aristotle, however, because his theory of human nature is much more sophisticated than Plato’s.

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

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

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### **Biographical Sketch**

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