

THROUGH THE BROOK OF FIRE: MARX'S CONCEPT OF SPECIES- BEING AND HIS BREAK WITH FEUERBACH

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Once upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the idea of gravity. If they were to knock this notion out of their heads, say by stating it to be a superstition, a religious concept, they would be sublimely proof against any danger from water. His whole life long he fought against the illusion of gravity, of whose harmful results all statistic brought him new and manifold evidence. This valiant fellow was the type of the new revolutionary philosophers in Germany.¹

-- Karl Marx

The task of this paper is to re-visit a concept that has long escaped proper clarification: *Gattungswesen*, or species-being. Many scholars have often assumed that the concept has no bearing on Marx's later developments, or that it invariably bears the baggage of idealistic humanism not yet shorn by the younger Marx.²

While there may be traces of an incipient idealism in the early Marx—a product of his own post-Hegelian *milieu*—this paper will show how Marx inherits Feuerbach's concept of species-being and, by overcoming its limitations, arrives at a new concept of humanity. I will show how Feuerbach fails to materialistically inverse Hegel, and how this failure leads him to a concept of man that is ultimately ahistorical—as it fixes a human essence beyond human history—and is idealist, to the extent that it begins from abstractions from the world. I will also

¹ Marx, Karl. *A Critique of The German Ideology*. Published by Progress Publishers, 1932. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf

² See Louis Althusser's *Marxism and Humanism*.

show how Marx's inheritance of the concept situates it squarely in the activity of men and women, rather than in a realm estranged from world occupied by humanity. In this way, humanity's essence is conceived of as something dependent on *its own* social-historical development, rather than something owing itself to trans-historical ideas.

The *point* of this paper, then, is twofold. First, it is to show that there can exist a concept of *what it means to be human*—man's species-being or species-essence—that does not have to rely on religious or philosophical abstractions. That “human nature” is often premised by transient ideas or abstract principles is often the reason why talk about ‘human nature’ or ‘the essence of man’ is dismissed as idealist. What I try to show is that there *is* something unique about how human beings relate to their world, and that this can be understood in a way which is not separate from humanity (as in religion, for Feuerbach's critique). Second, it is to show how Marx's critique of Feuerbach's limitations gives way to a recognition of mankind that carries with it *political* implications. If it is true, as I will show it is for Marx, that man's species-being is inherently social and determined by its historical existence, then political philosophies which fail to recognize these aspects of mankind will fall short of serving their purported object: *actually existing* men and women, and not men and women as they appear in this or that fantastic doctrine. This I will discuss in detail below.

By exploring the debate over the meaning of species-being in Feuerbach and the young Marx, I will also argue that interpreters who dismiss the debate about any kind of ‘human essence’ as being residual Young Hegelianism wrongly conflate it with idealism as such.³ In

³ This also stands for thinkers who reject any essentialism on the grounds of its purportedly idealistic presuppositions. For instance, Gilles Deleuze argues that the notion of a fixed, human essence implies the

contrast to this, what the concept does is to highlight the *mode of being* that belongs to humanity essentially, but which for Marx resists any permanent formalization beyond the work of history. Furthermore, I will argue that although Marx eventually overcomes Feuerbach's idealism and ceases to use terms like "species-being," there is a continuity of the basic concept that stretches all the way up to the third volume of *Capital*. What is retained from beginning to end is that mankind has a way of being in the world that is particular to *it*, and that this way of being in the world puts it in contradiction with political philosophies that do not acknowledge this social or historical dimension.

I should also clarify the phrase 'mode of being,' a term which I have used to draw attention to the ontological basis of mankind's particular way of being in the world. Although a deep philosophical notion of being is not required for understanding my use of the phrase, the language draws from Heidegger and can be thought of synonymously with his concept *Dasein*.⁴ The reason I have opted for 'mode of being' rather than 'human condition' or 'human nature' is twofold. First, I want to distance myself and my arguments from humanistic philosophies which treat 'the human condition' in isolation from the totality of beings, of which man forms a part of and is always engaged in; second, I want to remove any naturalistic premises that may be assumed when I speak of language, sociality, etc., as belonging to man's unique way of being.⁵

"subordination of difference" to the transcendent Idea, which he traces back to errors of Platonic idealism. See, Deleuze, Gilles. *Difference and Repetition* (Athlone Press: London, 1994), 59.

⁴ *Dasein* in Heidegger's use of the term is that entity for whom the question of Being is a question at all. Humanity *has* *Dasein*, because humanity is an entity which can question its own being or the being of any other entity in the world. A chair does not have *Dasein*, because a chair is never impressed with the *question of Being*.

⁵ For Heidegger, *Dasein's* Being-in-the-world has "always dispersed itself or even split itself up into definite ways of Being-in," all of which are premised on having *concern* [*Besorgen*] as its way of Being. In Heidegger's conception, as in mine, *Dasein*—man's unique mode of being-in-the-world—is always-already concerned and engaged with the

Additionally, I want to make clear that man's unique mode of being is still within the whole of being, and is not to be considered here abstractly and apart from the world of meaning he dwells in. As Marx put it in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, "*man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man.*"⁶

When I deal with language, I deal with language considered phenomenologically, i.e. *as language*, not the origins or the ontic nature of it. Man dwells in a world, and as a man—as a particular *mode* of being—there are unique ways he must engage with and relate to it. Whether language or sociality are embedded naturalistically—for instance that language has a biological component—would be irrelevant and misses the point of my argument, which is to situate the way man is *comported* in the face of being necessarily, as man.⁷

world around it. Apathy, by this token, is only a "deficient mode," or concern in the negative. See, Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time* (Harper & Row: New York, 1962), 83.

⁶ Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Retrieved from the Marxist Internet Archive (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>)

⁷ By naturalism in Feuerbach, I can defer to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's definition of 'ontological naturalism': "that all spatiotemporal entities must be identical to or metaphysically constituted by physical^[3] entities. Many ontological naturalists thus adopt a physicalist attitude to mental, biological, social and other such "special" subject matters. They hold that there is nothing more to the mental, biological and social realms than arrangements of physical entities." (Papineau, David, "Naturalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/naturalism/>). However, to broaden this conception, I would also consider naturalism from the point of view of seeing species-being, human psychology, etc., as part of the continuum of *natural history*, rather than considering them phenomenally as independent objects grasped by thought.

1.2 | WHY SPECIES-BEING? / THE PRACTICAL STAKES OF A CONCEPT OF MAN

The question of the *meaning* of species-being is not, as Lenin would have called it, “quibbling.” It is not aimless nitpicking, fit only for philosophers. The reason this question is worthy of exploration is that it allows for a non-idealist conception of what it means to be human, which in turn can open the door to conceiving a politics that better corresponds to man’s essence. While essentialist notions of mankind are often criticized for reifying the prevailing world, the following paper will do the opposite: it will argue for Marx as a thinker who has a socially and historically-determinant concept of mankind’s mode of being, but still *with* a definitive mode of being – namely, that mankind’s essence is that it is inherently social and open to history.⁸

Absent any definitive claim about what it means to be human, any doctrine—from liberal individualism to fascism—could be tenable, were it bred by social or historical circumstances. While I will argue that social and historical determinations shape the *expression* of mankind’s nature, this does not mean ‘anything goes’ or that human nature is infinitely flexible. As I will argue below, any political program that seeks to better correspond to humanity would need to acknowledge this social-historical dimension, lest it fall short of really being for humanity and therefore short of politics at all.⁹

⁸ Anne Phillips concisely expresses this anti-essentialist line of reasoning when she that argues that essentialist notions run the risk of “naturaliz[ing] or reify[ing] what may be socially created or constructed.” See, Phillips, Anne (2010) What’s wrong with essentialism? *Distinktion: Scandinavian journal of social theory*, 11 (1). pp. 47-60.

⁹ Without an acknowledgment of this social dimension, politics would fail to be *πολιτεία*, which as far back as Aristotle was understood as having man itself as its object. From his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “political science spends most of its pains on making the citizens to be of a certain character, viz. good and capable of noble acts.” (Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Translated by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge. (New York: Random House, 1941), 1099b30. As I will explain in a later section, politics must have as its object *man* for it to have the meaning of

If it is true that the form of humanity's social essence is historically and socially contingent, there are two points that follow. First, it follows that humanity is at least in part responsible for its own nature, even if individual men and women are not sufficient on their own.¹⁰ This in turn means that prevailing assumptions about human nature can be thought of as historically determined and thus contingent on the activity of human beings, or what Marx called human practice.¹¹ Secondly and most importantly for this paper, it would imply that a politics that fits mankind's social essence would have to acknowledge this social dimension to humanity's being, and that Robinson Crusoe-type individualism could not possibly correspond with humanity's being.

Liberal individualism, by this token, would be fundamentally incompatible with the essence of man, which is always and invariably with-others (*Mitsein*). Any political project that aims to stay true to its declared object, i.e. to actually-existing men and women and not to chimeras that are abstracted from them, must be *social* in orientation.

For the opposite reason, I will also show how idealist forms of politics which take the social *as such* as their object—i.e. idealist forms of socialism—also fail. A recognition of man's

politics, but it must also acknowledge the *historical* and therefore transient element so it does not worship before the calcified image of *one* era of man's history, social organization, etc. The less political programs are able to do this, the more estranged they are from their own purported object: humanity.

¹⁰ Alain Badiou arrives at a psychoanalytically informed view closely corresponding with the one developed here. In *The Theory of the Subject*, he writes that "the subject [is] 'the metonymy of the lack of being'" as well as "that which gives being to the lack." This captures in a psychanalytic lens what my paper argues philosophically: "the subject" is homologous to humanity, and the "metonymic lack of being" is homologous to the malleability of man's essence by "that which gives being to the lack," i.e., the historical and social determinations men and women are thrown into. The primary difference between the view developed here and Badiou's is that I conceive of this *mode of being* as equivalent to the essence of humanity, and thus see in the Young Marx an early formulation of this philosophical conception of mankind. See, Badiou, Alain. *The Theory of the Subject* (Continuum: New York, 2009), 141.

¹¹ See Thesis II of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*.

essence as social but not *historically* determined means the fixation on forms of social relations which have already been outmoded by history, i.e. which no longer correspond to man's objective being. In such a case, as in the case with historical fascism, the form of association that is recognized by the state is an artificial one with its basis solely in the particular subjectivity of the existing statehood, whose *own* premises are ideal are removed from history.

In short, I will argue that both individualistic liberalism and idealist socialism suffer from being exceedingly abstract with regards to man's being, but for different reasons. The answer to individualistic liberalism is a recognition of man's *social* dimension, and that *the social* is not simply an aggregate of individuals but has a real existence that can only be understood outside the framework of liberal individualism. The answer to idealistic and reactionary socialism is that the forms of sociality that characterize mankind are proper to historical developments, and do not exist as readymade forms abstracted from the real activity of men and women.

These are the political stakes that I will outline in the last section of this essay. Although I will explain their insufficiency with regards to the concept of species-being, this is only because this paper is principally concerned with the essence of man. I do not wish to confuse this with an exhaustive critique of them, which I would consider one-sided: clearly, there are other reasons why, for instance, individualist liberalism or idealist socialism could be critiqued. I only wish to critique them from the standpoint of how they *recognize* humanity, which I believe is abstract and incomplete.

1.3 | STRUCTURE OF THE PAPER

I will begin by analyzing the significance of the term ‘species-being’ as it stands for Feuerbach. In this analysis, I will consider it from the standpoint of its two terms: first species, then being. By understanding it in this way, I will attempt a holistic account of the concept and its determinations.

Proceeding from this, I will provide a brief overview of Feuerbach’s philosophy and contextualize *Gattungswesen* in his works, and finally on to its idealist limitations—and *why* they are idealistic.

The next section will first give an overview of the Young Marx and his relation to Hegel and Feuerbach, then outline Marx’s critique and overcoming of Feuerbach, and finally on to the philosophical implications for this supersession of Feuerbach for a materialistic concept of humanity’s essence.

The fourth and final section will draw the political stakes of Marx’s concept of man: what this entails about both individualist liberalism and idealistic socialism, as well as what this means for Marx’s own project.

2 | ANALYTIC OF *GATTUNGSWESEN*

Since Feuerbach is an explicit naturalist who openly proclaims that philosophy—though queen of the sciences—must nevertheless begin from natural premises in order to be truly infinite, it may seem intuitive to think that Feuerbach’s notion of *species* will inherently be naturalistic and make no pretense to deeper, super-natural commitments.¹² For Feuerbach, what begins in nature must end in nature, and for this reason one might also be primed to read Marx’s use of ‘species-being’ as an equally naturalistic, rather than a philosophical, description. By breaking apart *Gattungswesen* and analyzing each part individually, then together once again, I will accomplish a more concrete determination of species-being from the standpoint of Feuerbach. By analyzing this concept, we can proceed to Feuerbach’s philosophy and the role species-being places in it. I will begin with the concept of species (2.2) and proceed to the concept of being (2.3).

2.2 | THE CONCEPT OF SPECIES – *GATTUNG*

Feuerbach’s use of species is not a mystery. Species is simply that type, class, or collection to which an individual belongs; each individual, in turn, is a dividual of this species.¹³ Despite its translation to the English ‘species,’ the word *Gattung* more precisely means type, category, class, or kind, and thus is closer to ‘genus.’ This is important to bear in mind given that

¹² Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*. Translated and introduced by Zawar Hanfi (London: Verso, 2012), 136-138

¹³ Feuerbach 103

the English translation of *Gattung* to species favors the German zoological term *Spezies*, which conceptually related to *Gattung* but is not at all synonymous. The etymological roots of *Gattung*, in fact, fit surprisingly well with what we will see is Martin Milligan's explanation of aggregation or collection; from Middle High German, *Gattung* stems from *gaten*, "to come together, to fit."¹⁴

Feuerbach calls this concept of species a "characteristic mode of being" that, for those conscious entities possessing species-being, becomes an object of thought.¹⁵ Feuerbach will, furthermore, cast the idea of a species animated by a single individual—or in any particular manifestation—to be an impossibility, in an open attack on the ambitions of Hegelianism and the notion of any individual standing for the universal as such.¹⁶ Marx, too, will use species in more or less the same way, when he is speaking of species in isolation from species-being (literally the *essence* of man's species). When he speaks of man's estrangement (*Entfremdung*) from himself and nature, he speaks of the individual's abstraction from the species to which he belongs.

There is little scholarly debate concerning the meaning of *species* as it pertains to Feuerbach or Marx, nor is there any reason to sense a profound disagreement between the two on the part of its meaning. What *is* controversial among scholars is not species, but being (*Wesen*): first, its precise meaning, and secondly, its determination of humanity's unique mode of being. Since the two are related, I will now examine the term *Wesen* in isolation—including

¹⁴ ("Gattung." *Wiktionary*, en.m.wiktionary.org/wiki/gattung)

¹⁵ Feuerbach, 97

¹⁶ Stepelevich, Lawrence. *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). 98

its place in the naturalistic and philosophic spectrum—and then proceed to the term in context, viz. the *Wesen* of the (human) *Gattung*.

2.3 | THE CONCEPT OF BEING – *WESEN*

Having the significance of first translating Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* into English, Martin Milligan's interpretation of the concept *Wesen* is one with which translators and interpreters alike have reckoned. In examining the terminology Marx employs in his notes from 1844—notes which were still saturated with Feuerbachian terminology—Milligan frankly remarks that “[t]here is no English word with the range of meaning as *Wesen*.”¹⁷

Wesen, like *Sein*, means ‘being.’ But it can be differentiated from *Sein* in referring to “the solid core of something,” or its “essential, as against its inessential” aspects, its “substance, as against its accidental features.”¹⁸ The first meaning of *Wesen*, Milligan notes, is *essence*. This notion corresponds to a highly Aristotelian definition,¹⁹ something which should not surprise anyone familiar with Marx's classical education.

¹⁷ Marx, Engels 11

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ For Aristotle, what is substantial is what stands beneath as *consistent*, or self-same, beyond all accidental properties. However, properties for Aristotle need not be contingent or accidental in every case. In the *Topics*, Aristotle gives the example of the ability of a man to learn grammar: *as a man*, i.e. *belonging to his essence* as a man, he is capable of learning grammar: “Thus it is a property of man to be capable of learning grammar: for *if A be a man, then he is capable of learning grammar*, and if he be capable of learning grammar, then he is a man” (Aristotle. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. Translated by W. A. Pickard-Cambridge. (New York: Random House, 1941), 102a20)

But despite having arrived at what seems to be a clear-cut answer, Milligan shows that *Wesen* can prove more ambiguous. He continues: *Wesen*, in addition to referring to essence, is also commonplace German for *any* being, e.g. a human being or the Supreme Being. Even still, it can connote any kind of collection or aggregate, as it is often used in an affixed manner: *Zeitungswesen, Postwesen, Steuerwesen, etc.*²⁰

It would appear that *Wesen* has three meanings: as the substance behind an individual,²¹ as class or category, and as aggregation. But while it is important and necessary for a close reading of each use of *Wesen* or its affixed forms, the differences between the three are, as I will argue, not as pronounced as they may appear. While it may be true that Feuerbach and Marx intend on different uses at different times, *Wesen* still orbits around an essentially Aristotelian concept. Any class (or *species*, as we will see) must have some kind of *essential* identity which links all individual units together, just as every aggregate is an aggregation of individual things sharing the *same* substance. If we wish to get to the root of the matter, we must consider the most elementary definition of *Wesen* not as class or aggregation, but as *substance*.

For class and aggregation must be predicated on *Wesen* as substance, but substance cannot be predicated of class or aggregation. Fruit is a classification of a certain seed-bearing outgrowth from flowering plants,²² and a bunch of twelve apples still share in common the

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Importantly, the substance that *stands below* an individual and which an individual is an individual unit of.

²² Aristotle, in his *Topics*, says that a “definition is a phrase signifying a thing’s essence. It is rendered in the form either of a phrase in lieu of a term, or of a phrase in lieu of another phrase; for it is sometimes possible to define the meaning of a phrase. People whose rendering consists of a term only, try as they may, clearly do not render the definition of the thing in question, because a definition is always a phrase of a certain kind” (Aristotle 191 / 102a3)

common substance of being an apple. The clarification of this issue will prove crucial in what will follow, as we examine some of Feuerbach's usages of *Gattungswesen* and make clear that his concept hinges less on a naturalistic or biological account of human need and has more in common with an Aristotelian-philosophic notion of being/essence.

3 | FEUERBACH AND HIS LIMITS

In terms of language, the name ‘human being’ is indeed a particular name, but in terms of truth it is *the name of all names* ... Whatever the human being names and articulates, it always articulates its own essence. Language is thus the criterion of how high or low humanity’s degree of cultivation is.²³

-- Ludwig Feuerbach, *Provisional Theses for the Reformation of Philosophy*

Before we can delve into the context and role of species-being in Feuerbach’s philosophy, I will provide a cursory overview of Feuerbach’s philosophy and the context in which his philosophy was born (3.2). Proceeding from this, I will explain the role of species-being in Feuerbach’s philosophy (3.3), then a section on the role of language and sociality (3.4), and finally a section on the limitations of Feuerbach’s conception (3.5).

3.2 | FEUERBACH THE YOUNG HEGELIAN

Because Feuerbach is often thought of only as it concerns the development of Marx, his own unique and groundbreaking philosophical—and even political—vision is not often given the recognition it is due. Above all, Feuerbach was a *humanist* philosopher. For Feuerbach, the ends of man are man, and the stultifying and conservative-Christian atmosphere of post-Hegelian Germany lent itself to the disassociation of man from himself.

²³ Stepelevich 169

In his *Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach seeks to separate the “True or Anthropological Essence of Religion” from its “False or Theological” side. Religion *as such* stands for the “disuniting of man from himself,” where God is the infinite, divine, essence of man that has become estranged from himself and treated like an external being. In his worship of God, man “contemplates his own latent nature.”²⁴ The powers he puts in God are what he has surrendered from himself – and he has done this *voluntarily*. What belongs to him is misrecognized as belonging to something *greater* than himself, and so long as he is not in possession of it, he will remain prostrate before the perfected thought of his actual being.

Even the queen of the sciences is estranged from man in the grasp of religion. Philosophy is rationalized theology, and theology is the inverted picture of man’s own latent powers.²⁵ For man to reclaim himself and his nature, he must engage in a critique of *religion* and the religious consciousness that permeated German philosophy.

Feuerbach belonged to that generation of thinkers called the Young Hegelians. Like Ruge and Strauss, he criticized Hegel and Hegelianism from the standpoint of Hegel’s thought. Feuerbach’s ambition with Hegel was to invert him *materialistically*. Rather than begin from the indeterminate, abstract Being in *The Logic*, Feuerbach questions why one cannot start with Being *itself*, i.e., Being as it *actually exists*.²⁶ He criticizes Hegel not on account of his dialectical philosophy, but on account of his system being insufficiently critical.

²⁴ Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. Translated by George Elliot. Prometheus Books, New York: 1989. Pg. 33

²⁵ Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Fiery Brook: Selected Writings*. Translated and introduced by Zawar Hanfi (London: Verso, 2012), 178

²⁶ Stepelevich, Lawrence. *The Young Hegelians: An Anthology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). 100

In short, his criticism of Hegel, and Hegel's 'logocentrism,' is this: there are no presuppositionless beginnings. Thought is prior to the presentation of thought, and the abstract beginning of Hegel's *Logic*—indeterminant, abstract Being—rests on the presuppositions that are otherwise opaque to Hegel's system. The issue with Hegel's *Logic* is that he presupposes pure logic as the starting point when there is an objectivity a priori to logic, to Pure Thinking. This objectivity is what Feuerbach calls *sensuousness*, or *sensuous-being*. Hegel takes perceptions for granted when he speaks of the "mergence of Being into Nothingness," for it is not clear if disappearing is "a notion or rather a sensuous perception."²⁷

The *political* upshot of this critique of religion and of Hegelian philosophy was never realized explicitly by Feuerbach. He lost his post and was reduced to increasing obscurity, especially after the revolutions of 1848 (which he played no part in).²⁸ Still, his connections with Wilhelm Weitling and Lorenz von Stein²⁹ reveal an affinity with liberal and socialist-humanist thinkers, which we can speculate is an outgrowth of Feuerbach's notion of species-being.

²⁷ Stepelevich, 108

²⁸ Gooch, Todd, "Ludwig Andreas Feuerbach", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2020/entries/ludwig-feuerbach/>>.

²⁹ Much has been said about Weitling and his humanistic socialism, but von Stein's "vision of a liberal state as active historic partner in the making of civil society" reveals a predecessor to the liberal-socialist welfare states of the 20th Century. Like we will see with Feuerbach, von Stein still premises the social question by way of eternal ideas, which in the political sphere takes the form of bourgeois law and the subject of liberal sovereignty, viz. the individual. See: Gordon, Colin (1991). *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. University of Chicago Press. p.31

3.3 | THE ROLE OF SPECIES-BEING IN FEUERBACH'S PHILOSOPHY

Where Feuerbach uses the term *species-being* in his works, it often accompanies an account of mankind that strikes it off from the rest of the animal kingdom. This may appear a curious concession for the naturalist Feuerbach, until one remembers that his chief commitment is to a sort of humanism, in the capacity of returning what is alienated from mankind back to mankind. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Feuerbach makes clear from the beginning that the primary distinction between humanity and animals is that the former possesses an *infinite* consciousness, while the latter, if they are said to possess consciousness, have an extremely restrictive kind. Where the animal has a “simple” life, man’s is twofold.³⁰ Where the animal cannot distinguish inner from outer life, “in the case of man there is an inner *and* an outer life.”³¹ This animal-consciousness, however, is not consciousness “[s]trictly speaking.” It is a lower form of consciousness, consisting only of “the sense of the feeling of self,” i.e. the ability to sensuously discriminate objects *without* the mediation of consciousness.³²

This distinction is crucial, for in it lays the connection between species-being, consciousness, and language. We have remarked that earlier that species refers to class or type. But here, when Feuerbach is speaking about animal-consciousness and its distinction from consciousness proper (belonging to human beings), we see that the chief characteristic of

³⁰ Cf. Nietzsche in *On the Uses and Abuses of History*

³¹ Feuerbach, 98

³² Feuerbach, 97

species-being is that it belongs *only* to those whose species exists *as an object of thought for itself*.

For an animal, a stick cannot be distinguished *as* a stick. It can be sensuously demarcated, but *as a stick*—this *universal type* to which this individual thing belongs to—it has no being. The kind of consciousness that Feuerbach thinks human beings possess not only can discriminate sensuously, but can grasp the *being* of a stick. In other words, *consciousness can grasp the stick as a stick*, since consciousness proper for Feuerbach is consciousness of the universal. This is why Feuerbach speaks of the animal as being able to distinguish itself as an individual, *but not as a species*.³³ It cannot conceive of itself as belonging to any *order of being*, which would imply mediation by thought.³⁴

To put it another way, an animal, says Feuerbach, *does* have a feeling of *self*, of *individuality*. But this *feeling of self* (i.e. of self in “common centre of successive sensations”) is impoverished.³⁵ What is lacking is a sense of *species*, of its *belonging to a species*. A dog may, in some sense, have some kind of ability to sensuously demarcate itself from the food it eats. But a dog is not aware of itself *as a dog*. It has no sense of the *essence of what it is*, only (and at a minimum) *that it is*. What is missing is a *concept* that can represent the universal *as* a universal: a dog *as* a dog, a stick *as* a stick; humanity *as* humanity.

³³ Feuerbach 97-98

³⁴ This is also the reason for science as “consciousness of species” (*ibid*). Irrespective of the definition of science given, it will always imply categorization. Without an understanding of the *mode* of being that belongs to things—that belonging to wax is the property of renderability—there can be no systemic knowledge, no science.

³⁵ Feuerbach, 98

Human beings, unlike animals, possess *species-being*. This *species-being* is beyond a mere sense of sociability with its kind, as any non-isolative animal can do (e.g., the collectivism of ants or of bees, or a pack of wolves).³⁶ Species-being implies that the very *nature* of itself *as belonging to* a universal becomes itself an object of thought.

Hegelian self-consciousness, then, is not enough. What must then proceed is a self-consciousness of its species-essence, which in turn allows a comprehension of the essential nature of *other things*, i.e. which comprehends things *as things*. True separation of self and what is outside the self can only be accomplished on the basis of this fact. In being unable to demarcate inner and outer, the animal is unable to grasp the essence of objects outside of it. Man, by contrast, has built within him a dichotomy between subject and object. And with this dichotomy, he is also able to realize his essence *as a subject*, to be both "I and thou."³⁷ Only man is aware he is a man, and in being a man, can live up to or fail to live up to his *essence* as a man.

Religion, having identity with the *essence* of man (i.e. corresponding with the *human essence* which makes man different from animals), is consciousness of the infinite; religious feeling is the feeling man has towards his own essence, estranged and projected outwards as God. The infinite is a concept which is based in man's *own* consciousness, which is, in its own nature, *infinite*. The concept of infinity is a form of self-consciousness, for in the concept of

³⁶ Even Hobbes recognizes this distinction. He writes of how "Bees and Ants live sociably [with] one another ... yet have no other direction, than their particular judgements and appetites, nor speech, whereby one of them can signifie to another, what he thinks expedient for the common benefit" (From Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Cambridge University Press, 1996. P.119). What is crucial to note for this paper is that language and signification is tied directly with outlining the universal ("the common benefit"), just as it is with species-being in Feuerbach.

³⁷ Stepelevich, 130

infinity is the concept of his own nature as one which extends infinitely outward. Reason, Will, and Affection/Love are all fractals radiating from the same essence, and being *faces* of the same essence, reflect its essence *perfectly*. Reason, isolated from its irrational other (in which it finds identity), is necessarily *perfected* Reason. Willing, loving, and thinking are said by Feuerbach to be man's *highest faculties*,³⁸ and express the *absolute nature* of man. It follows that man "exists to think, to love, and to will."³⁹ Each of these *attributes* of man's natural essence is in itself: the object of reason is itself, just as the object of love is itself, etc. The departure returns to itself: that which is divine exists for its own sake. Love, reason, and the will exist solely to *experience themselves*.

Activity is object-oriented. The activity of subjects is to secure its object, and its own object is its nature in *objective* form. The individual recognizes in its appropriation of the object of another individual as its own, only because the individual recognizes in the other individual *his own nature*.

Man is delivered to the cradle of his essence in his contemplation of the object before him.⁴⁰ The *fascination* of man with his object is the revelation of man's *own* nature. In showing what he is lacking, light is thrown onto his own nature ("his true objective *ego*"). The eye, which is "heavenly in its nature," elevates man beyond the earth and into the heavens. Thus is allowed *speculation* about the beyond. It is no accident, says Feuerbach, that the first

³⁸ Stepelevich, 130

³⁹ Stepelevich, 131

⁴⁰ Stepelevich, 132

philosophers were astronomers: their ‘heads were in the clouds.’ Contemplation is fixed to the human essence.

Man’s own nature presents him with the Absolute. The power of the object which stands over him is *his* own power, only in estranged form.⁴¹ The melody itself does not bring about intense feelings, but the melody present with meaning and emotion. Man experiences that which is already present in himself: “we can affirm nothing without affirming ourselves.”⁴² The crucial pivot of the text proceeds from this: that all metaphysical, transcendental, etc., speculation and *religion*, therefore, has significance “only of the secondary, the subjective, the medium, the organ.”⁴³ If feeling is the essential organ of religion, Feuerbach says, “the nature of God is nothing else than an expression of the nature of feeling.”⁴⁴ If the divine can be felt, then it must show that divinity is already present in the feeling. But contrary to many thinkers who might posit feeling as the proof of God, Feuerbach is aiming in the opposite direction: that God is proof of the divinity—the Absoluteness—of feeling. Heaven proves the existence of earth, not the other way around. This follows from the essential move Feuerbach is making: that “the object of any subject is nothing else than the subject’s own nature taken objectively.”⁴⁵

This allows Feuerbach to make this bombshell conclusion: that the “divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature *purified*, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective – i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct

⁴¹ Stepelevich, 133

⁴² *ibid*

⁴³ Stepelevich, 136

⁴⁴ *ibid*

⁴⁵ Stepelevich, 139

being.”⁴⁶ The perfect qualities and attributes of God are images of those qualities and attributes found in human nature. “The necessity of the subject lies only in the necessity of the predicate,” Feuerbach says, and “the predicate is the *truth* of the subject” – and the *predicate* of the subject of divinity is actual, sensuous man.⁴⁷ A humanist as he is, Feuerbach does not seem to be explicitly touting a rejection of God. His atheism is only to the extent that God, which is an “existent, real being,” is “nothing else than the essential qualities of man himself.”⁴⁸

The *truly* critical-revolutionary portion comes only later. Feuerbach remarks that the result of a positive conception of the divine, embodying all the divine qualities that are found already imperfectly in human beings, necessitates a *negative* conception of humanity. “To enrich God, man must become poor; that God may be all, man must be nothing.”⁴⁹ The more man puts into God, the less he retains in himself. Man *puts his being, his essence, in God*. The question announces itself: *why should he not have it for himself?* The mystery of religion is such: man projects himself into heaven, and in turn makes himself into an object of this heavenly projection. Man becomes an object to his objectified essence, which he finds looming over and estranged from him. Subject and predicate are reversed.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Stepelevich, 140

⁴⁷ Stepelevich, 149

⁴⁸ Stepelevich, 145

⁴⁹ Stepelevich, 150

⁵⁰ Stepelevich, 153

3.4 | LANGUAGE AND SOCIALITY

Up until this point, we have been speaking about the species of *things*, but not of humanity itself. This is because, unlike other things—which do not for themselves possess species-being, since they do not possess consciousness—*man is a species-being*. A discussion of man’s species-being is *ipso facto* a discussion about man’s sociality, i.e. a discussion about other men.

Man is a social being and remains social even when in isolation. The animal “converses” only with itself, whereas men and women assume for themselves a universal character. While an animal cannot assume its *specific* functions without others of its kind, mankind “can perform the functions *characteristic to his species*—thought and speech—in isolation from another individual.”⁵¹ Belonging to man’s being is both “I and You,” with man being able to put himself in the place of another because *that to which he belongs*—tribe, family, nation, or his humanity, taken abstractly—is an object of thought expressed through language, and he *feels* that he belongs to it. Humanity is social *even in isolation*, for language belongs to consciousness and consciousness belongs to humanity. This is backed up further with what Feuerbach says concerning man’s species-being in his “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy.” In this piece, he makes the connection *immediately* to language:

Language is nothing other than the realization of the species: i.e., the ‘I’ is mediated with the ‘You’ in order, by eliminating their individual separateness, to manifest the

⁵¹ Feuerbach 98

unity of the species ... A demonstration has its ground only in the mediating activity of thought for others. Whenever I wish to prove something, I do so for others.⁵²

What belongs to humanity's species—what is, furthermore, distinctive or *essential* about humanity's species—is that it is social. Language is the medium by which individual and species are united, and by this fact mankind, which possesses language, has sociality as a part of its being. Language, says Feuerbach, *realizes* the species – it makes it *actual*. It is through speech and speaking that humanity has access to its being, and its being (*Wesen*) is realized in the sociality opened up by speech. Feuerbach makes this more clear in one of his later writings, where he states plainly that what all men have in common is that they think: it “belongs to the essence of man.”⁵³ The role language plays here, which is identical to the role it plays in earlier works, is that it “shows or realizes what thought is *in itself*,” viz., a *social* phenomenon.⁵⁴

For Feuerbach *and* for Marx, belonging to man's species-being is that he is a social animal. That is to say: *as* a social animal, the *mode of being* belonging to humankind is one which has sociality built into it. Belonging to man's mode of being-in-the-world is *that he is with others*, even when he is alone. *Mitsein*—with-others—belongs to man's being.

⁵² Stepelevich, 103

⁵³ Feuerbach 271

⁵⁴ Feuerbach 272

3.5 | LIMITS OF FEUERBACH'S NOTION: THE ABSENCE OF HISTORY

And yet Feuerbach says precious little about any sort of naturalistic or non-ideal demands wrought out of his species-essence (which, again, can be translated as 'man's mode of being,' 'the kind of being that belongs to man,' etc.). On the contrary, Feuerbach—when he moves on from language as the expression of his species-being—refers to “Reason, Will, and Heart.”⁵⁵ Not a drop of ink is spent detailing anything less than a thoroughly idealist account of what belongs to man's essence: “Reason, love, and power of will are perfections of man,” Feuerbach says, and they are “his highest powers, his absolute essence in so far as he is a man, the purpose of his existence.”⁵⁶

When Feuerbach fleshes out man's species-being, the closest he gets to a materialism of any kind is speaking about “air, the most spiritual and general medium of life” by which the sounds of speech are transmitted.⁵⁷ Rather than critically examine every presupposition of thought, Feuerbach repeats the error of *positing unexamined presuppositions*, something that he criticizes already in his introduction to the *Essence of Christianity*. Feuerbach succeeds in grounding the heavenly family in the earthly family, but he does not give way to the *a priori* of the material⁵⁸ *as such*, which for Marx is *precisely* what constituted the overturning of Hegel. To the contrary of this, Feuerbach still finds in man eternal truths that speak *through* him and exist before him, irrespective of those real conditions into which he finds himself thrown. The 'order'

⁵⁵ Feuerbach 99

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Feuerbach 103

⁵⁸ Materialism can be notoriously difficult to pin-down. In my conception, as it is in Marx's, the material is that which is not premised by thought, but which premises thought itself.

of determination remains in that *the idea of humanity* precedes the beating heart of man's actual being. It is not, as it is in Marx, caught up in the flux of being, but is fixed as an eternal category beyond history.

This is evinced by Feuerbach's *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, which Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* is modeled after. Feuerbach falls into the same line as Hegel: all history becomes the history of the Idea, and the Idea for Feuerbach ends up as "knowledge of the species."⁵⁹ Feuerbach fails, ultimately, to materialistically inverse Hegel. Rather than finding the basis of man's essence in actually existing premises, Feuerbach finds them in ideas *abstracted* from actually existing humanity. Rather than rooting God in the empirically verifiable, real conditions humanity finds itself in—e.g., his social relations particular to him, situated in history—Feuerbach roots God in eternal qualities of reason, love, and the power of will.

Two things in particular are lost due to Feuerbach's failure to move beyond an idealist conception of humanity. The first is simply that *nuance* is lost. God, for instance, does not represent something like 'Reason' in the abstract. God represents something *very concrete* about a particular people at a particular time. Friedrich Engels, for instance, wrote about the particular peoples that early Christianity took root in and *why* that was, i.e. as owing to their particular conditions in the Roman Empire. He also comments on Islam and the dynamic between "townsmen engaged in trade and industry" and nomadic Bedouins.⁶⁰ Religion, in other words, is understood not *abstractly*, as it is with Feuerbach, but *concretely*: as something that

⁵⁹ Feuerbach 189

⁶⁰ Engels, Friedrich. *On the History of Early Christianity. Die Neue Zeit, 1894–95*; translated by the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, 1957. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1894/early-christianity/index.htm>

corresponds to objective developments in a world that is not premised by thought. God may be a reflection of humanity's essence, but humanity is never humanity in the abstract; humanity is always *definite*.

The other casualty of Feuerbach's failure to move beyond Hegel's idealism is man as he *actually* exists. For Feuerbach, looking at God's qualities will tell us about the qualities inherent in humanity. But because Feuerbach does not consider man's essence from the standpoint of *history* but rather from intransient ideas, Feuerbach only reifies the *existing* society of his day. His concept of man remains an ideal concept, whose premises derive not from real material conditions but from ideas like reason, justice, love, or community.

These are the grounds on which Marx will break with Feuerbach: Feuerbach does not go far enough by the standards of what he sets out to do. However, though it might be tempting to think of Marx's essentialism as a 'hard,' ossified, 'material' essence which carries with it particular *material* needs which must be satisfied irrespective of historical context, the direction Marx moves in is precisely the opposite one. For it is in Feuerbach that Marx detects the tendency to "abstract from the historical process and to fix the religious sentiment as something by itself and to presuppose an abstract—*isolated*—human individual."⁶¹

⁶¹ Marx, Karl; Engels, Friedrich. *The Marx-Engels Reader: Second Edition*. Edited by Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, inc., 1978), 145

4 | MARX AND THE SUBLATION OF FEUERBACH

Hitherto men have constantly made up for themselves false conceptions about themselves, about what they are and what they ought to be. They have arranged their relationships according to their ideas of God, of normal man, etc. The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations. Let us liberate them from the chimeras, the ideas, dogmas, imaginary beings under the yoke of which they are pining away. Let us revolt against the rule of thoughts. Let us teach men, says one, to exchange these imaginations for thoughts which correspond to the essence of man; says the second, to take up a critical attitude to them; says the third, to knock them out of their heads; and -- existing reality will collapse.⁶²

-- Karl Marx, *A Critique of the German Ideology*

Marx's relation to Feuerbach is a topic that many scholars have commented on. Friedrich Engels, writing on his and Marx's indebtedness to that great thinker, considered Feuerbach "in many respects ... an intermediate link between Hegelian philosophy and our own conception."⁶³ By inverting the Holy Family and revealing its real basis in living humanity, Feuerbach set the stage for more far-reaching critique – critique which did not stop at religion, but pierced the foundations of law and statehood itself. Marx, in a letter to Feuerbach, would go so far to write that,

⁶² Marx, Karl. *A Critique of The German Ideology*. Published by Progress Publishers, 1932. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/Marx_The_German_Ideology.pdf

⁶³ Engels, Friedrich. *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. First published in *Die Neue Zeit*; republished by Progress Publishers, 1946. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, 1994. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1886/ludwig-feuerbach/index.htm>

*In these writings you have provided — I don't know whether intentionally — a philosophical basis for socialism and the Communists have immediately understood them in this way. The unity of man with man, which is based on the real differences between men, the concept of the human species brought down from the heaven of abstraction to the real earth, what is this but the concept of society!*⁶⁴

Still, Feuerbach's conception remains limited, and this is a limitation that Marx would come to recognize and state most explicitly in his *Theses on Feuerbach*. Below, we will look at how Marx would come to break with Feuerbach and his concept of species-being. I will do this by first commenting on the 'Feuerbachian' aspects of the young Marx's terminology, specifically to see how the contents of 'species-being' changes for Marx (4.1); how Marx roots species-being in social and historical determinations (4.2); the new concept of man Marx arrives at and its differences with Feuerbach (4.3); finally, I will end with the new concept of humanity that Marx arrives at.

4.1 | THE BREAK WITH FEUERBACH

Louis Althusser famously posited an epistemological break that separates Marx's earlier writings from his mature ones. Belonging to his earlier works are "all the expressions of Marx's idealist 'humanism,'" all of which are "Feuerbachian."⁶⁵ It was only in 1845, with the

⁶⁴ Marx, Karl. *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume III*. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, https://marxists.architecturez.net/archive/marx/works/1844/letters/44_08_11.htm

⁶⁵ Althusser, 45

unpublished *Theses on Feuerbach*, that Marx broke free from being a “prisoner of philosophy” and formulated a scientific worldview.⁶⁶

Indeed, it is certainly true that there was a time when Marx ceases to use the terms “species-being” and “alienation,” as he does freely in the *Manuscripts of 1844*. Although thinkers like Karl Korsch and György Lukács attempted to rescue Marx’s philosophy from what they saw as an overly mechanistic Marxism, there is a clear change of tone that sees a shift from the language of “philosophic anthropologism” (Feuerbach) to a theory “based upon historical materialism—in short, between philosophy and science.”⁶⁷

Additionally, as William Leogrande writes in his “Investigation into the ‘Young Marx’ Controversy,” the “existence of substantial continuity” between the young and old Marx, as evinced by reoccurring references to alienation in the *Grundrisse*, does not mean the refutation of the ‘periodization’ thesis pushed by Althusser’s camp.⁶⁸ For Leogrande, the absence of *species-being* in Marx after the 1845 *Theses* is due to the fact that Marx recognizes that humanity is not “communal by nature,” as is the case in species-being, but “is social by necessity.”⁶⁹ For Marx, man’s sociality—as with his possession of language—“only arises from the need, the necessity, of intercourse with other men” as part of their bare, economic survival and reproduction.⁷⁰ Its existence is owed to *historical* developments and to *real activity*, not to

⁶⁶ Althusser, 159

⁶⁷ Leogrande, William M. "An investigation into the " Young Marx" controversy." *Science & Society* (1977): 129-151, 132

⁶⁸ Leogrande, 131

⁶⁹ Leogrande, 140

⁷⁰ Marx, *A Critique of the German Ideology*, 11

timeless ideas discovered through philosophical contemplation. This implies that it is something subject to change and to development: it has a past, present, and future.

This shift away from Feuerbach's terminology and towards a new 'scientific' one is less the focus of this paper than what Marx is doing *with* his terminology. For unlike Althusser and Leogrande, my contention is that the content of Feuerbach's species-being changes with Marx. And as Leogrande points out, the eventual disuse of the term does not upset entirely the continuation of this basic concept well into Marx's mature years (*viz.* in *Kapital*). In this section, I will deal with Marx's break with Feuerbach, *not* from the Althusserian standpoint (which I do not entirely preclude), but from the standpoint that his use of species-being in the *Manuscripts* has a distinct character from Feuerbach's. Marx discards the term "species-being," but he only does this after changing the term's content. To unearth the philosophic core of Marx's notion, it is necessary to distinguish species-being and species-life.

According to James Miller, Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* reveals a notion of species-essence that is thoroughly saturated with philosophic underpinnings. Miller believes, furthermore, that this is a conception inherited by Marx, but with one crucial difference: that, in Marx, the highest expression of man's species-being "came not in the consciousness of the infinite, as for Feuerbach, but in objective human activity."⁷¹

What is this objective, human activity? Miller answers that it is *labor*. But there is a sharp difference between man's *species-being*, to which labor belongs, and man's *species-life*. Although Miller thinks, unlike the humanist Milligan, that the later Marx moves on to a kind of

⁷¹ Miller, James. *History and Human Existence – From Marx to Merleau-Ponty* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 23

empiricism, followers of Milligan's interpretation have also picked up on this distinction between species-being and species-life, a distinction that may sound like quibbling, but in fact reveals a great deal about the precise meaning of species-being and its relation to naturalistic premises.

James Czank, who likewise falls into Milligan's Aristotelian-leaning interpretation of *Gattungswesen*, observes this same point. For Czank, Marx rejects humanity as a *tabula rasa*, which might be assumed to be the default position of someone who rejects Feuerbach's humanism. "Marx set out from the idea that human qua human is both recognizable and ascertainable," Czank writes, and "that human beings can be defined psychologically as well as biologically, anatomically, and physiologically."⁷² Pointing in the direction of a holistic account of species-essence, i.e. one that transcends the all-too-easy naturalistic vs. philosophic distinction, Czank—following in Milligan's footsteps—builds an Aristotelian teleological model. When Marx argues against Bentham, for instance, he notes that one must study the nature of a dog to know what is useful and good for a dog; nature is not deduced from the principle of utility. There is no reason, Czank writes, to think that this model could not be attributed to humanity.

Czank resolves *Gattungswesen* in the "essential, definable, and normative" idea of what it means to be a human.⁷³ Essence, *Wesen*, is on this account an inner, mute, and general constitutive core of the species. This is contrasted by Czank with *species-life*, which is man's

⁷² Czank, James. *On the Origin of Species-Being: Marx Redefined* (Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society, 2012), 319

⁷³ *Ibid.*

“natural and biological side.”⁷⁴ Czank sharply observes that, were these to be the same, Marx would not have distinguished between them in the *Manuscripts*. Furthermore, it would not make sense that Marx distinguishes human from animal functions – “What is animal becomes human, and what is human becomes animal.”⁷⁵ In sum, Czank—and it would not be wrong to assume this holds for Milligan as well—holds that species-being can be summarized as the *idea* of what it means to be a human,⁷⁶ that species-being is distinct from species-life, and that Marx’s *oeuvre* centers around a critique of capitalism’s estrangement of humanity from its species-essence.⁷⁷

In contrast, Miller’s concept of species-life is less rooted in biological or naturalistic premises, though it does not eliminate their inclusion. Miller’s notion may be expressed thusly: that species-life is the objectification of man’s life practice in its *current* historical form. This, of course, includes in it various physiological, natural needs, but the accent is placed on *history* in Miller’s account. This account is given weight when one reads Marx on species-life directly. He writes,

It is just in the working-up of the objective world, therefore, that man first really proves himself to be a species being. This production is his active species life. Through and because of this production, nature appears as his work and his reality. The object of labor is, therefore, the objectification of man’s species life: for he duplicates himself not

⁷⁴ Czank, 320

⁷⁵ Marx, Engels 74

⁷⁶ Czank 319

⁷⁷ Cf. Leogrande, for whom Marx “stands for the elimination of human essence” (Leogrande 146).

only, as in consciousness, intellectually, but also actively, in reality, and therefore he contemplates himself in a world that he has created.⁷⁸

Species-life is the *particular* form of species-being, which belongs to man qua man. Species-life is not *a* particular form, but *the* form – the necessities, the demands, etc., of a particular historical juncture.

4.2 | FROM DUMB GENERALITY TO SOCIAL-HISTORICAL DETERMINATION

Animals *do not have species-being*. This is a position that both Marx and Feuerbach concur on. But where they differ is that man's species-essence is, in Marx, not a fixed category. Feuerbach, it has been said, resolves heaven in its earthly conditions, but in so doing, he takes the claims of heaven at face value. If the Heavenly Father is the Absolute realization of love, will, and reason, then Feuerbach has only to say that the fruition of love, will, and reason lies within human beings – hence, his humanism premised by way of noble *ideas*. Marx, however, has less of a fixed determination of species-essence. In Marx's conception, this is because humanity is premised by *its own history*, which does not proceed from thought but is the product of peoples and nations pursuing their own ends throughout history. Opposed to Czank, who claims that Marx's notion of species-essence is the "inner, mute, and general character of mankind," Marx expresses a nearly word-for-word *critique* of this view in Thesis VI: that the "human essence, [for Feuerbach], can be comprehended only as 'genus,' as an internal, dumb

⁷⁸ Marx, Engels 77

generality which merely *naturally* unites the many individuals” – i.e., not as one which is shaped by the practical struggles of social life (Thesis VIII).⁷⁹

It is Feuerbach’s, not Marx’s, view that man’s species-essence is an internal and dumb generality – or, in the nearly-exact wording of Czank’s misreading, “the inner, mute, and general character of mankind.” For Marx, the human essence is the *ensemble* of his social relations. This encompasses *not only* man’s physiological needs—which are satisfied in a socially determinate way—but also his psychological, spiritual, emotional, etc., characteristics. The opposition between a philosophic and naturalistic concept falls apart in Marx precisely on account of his supersession of naturalistic or philosophic horizons with a *historical* account. Miller, though perhaps going too far in considering Marx from a purely historicist and even empiricist perspective, is closer to the mark in his consideration of Marx’s break with Feuerbach and the development of his own notion of species-being away from idealist prejudices.

4.3 | HOW MARX SUBLATES FEUERBACH’S CONCEPT OF MAN: SPECIES-BEING ON A NEW AXIS

But now is the time skeptics will interject. For if Marx, like Feuerbach, leaves no stone unturned in the work of critique, then how can one speak of a new concept? How can it be thought of as a *new* notion of species-being, if Feuerbach already has in his an inkling of social determination? Certainly, a difference by degree cannot warrant a ‘break’. After all, we have

⁷⁹ Marx, Engels 145

already seen that Feuerbach's notion is *inherently* social – just as Marx's is. So how can Marx be a *break* with Feuerbach if his concept of species-being only develops it further? How can Marx be beyond Feuerbach, if he is still operating as a *more consistently critical* Feuerbachian?

In the *Manuscripts*, there is no clear opposition to Feuerbach. Marx says, quite freely, that

Man is a species being, not only because in practice and in theory he adopts the species as his object (his own as well as those of other things), but—and this is only another way of expressing it—but also because he treats himself as the actual, living species; because he treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being.⁸⁰

How hard is it to find parallels already in Feuerbach? Some years earlier, Feuerbach already says this. Marx says that man is unique in that he adopts “the species as his object;” Feuerbach says that man's consciousness is rooted in “cognizance of the species.”⁸¹ Marx says man “treats himself as a universal and therefore a free being;” Feuerbach says that man “knows himself to be the whole, because he distinguishes himself from himself.”⁸² Marx says man is a social animal, but Feuerbach already said that thought's objectivity is proven in its uniting of I and You, i.e. through *speech*.⁸³ Wherein lies the difference, when Marx is only *building* upon the Feuerbachian foundation?

The mistake of those who deny a *qualitative change* in Marx's use of species-being lies in confusing the essence of the matter with its surface appearance. For on the surface, Marx is

⁸⁰ Marx 75

⁸¹ Stepelevich 129

⁸² Stepelevich 104

⁸³ Stepelevich 103

merely a continuation of the same Feuerbachian criticism. This is apparent when ones considers things *from their appearances only*. But when one sees the inner determinations of these terms as they are being used in Marx, one sees that *not only* has sociality become a dynamic process with the inclusion of history, but it has been set on an entirely new axis. One sees this most explicitly in the *Theses on Feuerbach*, whose most important features fade into obscurity the more attention is devoted to the 11th thesis.

Marx says that Feuerbach “resolves the religious essence into the human essence.”⁸⁴

Fair enough: Feuerbach’s entire *project* is premised on this point. What is the issue?

It is that Feuerbach is unable to follow through the *negation of the negation*. Feuerbach resolves heaven in its earthly conditions, but he is unable to move from the shadow of heaven. Feuerbach, proud realist, demands “Enough of words, come down to the real things!”⁸⁵ yet he will define the essence of mankind as “Reason, Will, Affection.”⁸⁶ He resolves heaven in earth, but in this way does not actually move *beyond* the heavenly world of pure thinking. What belongs to God belongs to humanity, but it belongs to humanity *absolutely*. Thus is the essence of man resolved in three eternal categories – first thought to reside in God, now rediscovered in himself.

Feuerbach for this reason remains an idealist: he is unable to move beyond an *abstract* conception of man, viz., he takes humanity considered from the standpoint *beyond* history, just

⁸⁴ Marx/Engels 145

⁸⁵ Stepelevich 114

⁸⁶ Stepelevich 130

as ethereal. For Marx, on the contrary, this “abstract individual” belongs to a *particular* form of society – *not society taken as such*.⁸⁷

It is not enough, then, to say that Marx *merely* adds history to man’s species-being. In *situating* man’s social essence historically, what in fact is done is that man’s sociality is placed on an *entirely new axis*. The fundamental structure is different. For in Feuerbach, man’s sociality *still does not belong to him*. It belongs to him only *abstractly*, in thought. In Marx’s account, for whom history is a product of men and women, man’s essence is *returned* to himself. Man’s essence ceases to belong to transhistorical ideas existing beyond human history, but is dynamic and belongs to the activity of men and women in the process of their historical development.⁸⁸ Feuerbach makes pretenses to beginning from what is real, but because he has only an abstract understanding of the real, he begins with abstractions. Marx turns Feuerbach on his head as much as he does Hegel: ideas, consciousness, are not what he begins with (including fixed ideas of the human essence, e.g. humanity being ‘innately’ communal). Marx breaks with Feuerbach by beginning with man’s *real conditions of existence*, with his *actual being*, just like Feuerbach breaks with Hegel’s *Logic* by beginning with real, sensuous being, instead of being in the abstract.

If Miller is correct in his assessment that Marx makes a break with Feuerbach *before* he abandons the term species-being, then what Marx does before employing a new conceptual

⁸⁷ Marx/Engels 145

⁸⁸ Consciousness, which Marx links directly to language in *The German Ideology*, is the “representation of the practical activity, of the practical process of development of men” (Marx 19). Like Feuerbach, Marx holds that it is language and the consciousness that results therefrom that separates humanity from the animal kingdom. Unlike Feuerbach, Marx says this consciousness is “not devoid of premises” – its premises, which are *necessarily* outside of it, are *material* ones: “their activity and the material conditions under which they live, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity” (Marx, *The German Ideology*, 6).

vocabulary is to set species-being on a *new* axis. This axis is no longer rooted in ahistorical ideas—Reason, Will, and Heart—but in man’s *real activity*. In other words, there is a shift from the primacy of fixed ideas or concepts towards a primacy of activity – an activity that is always definite and particular, as it is an activity in a certain context and is always *for something*.

T.E. Wartenberg, in his “‘Species-Being’ and ‘Human Nature’ in Marx,” argues for this point exactly. In his view, which I also share, the absence of the concept of ‘species-being’ in Marx’s later writings often makes it hard to discern a *conceptual* continuity, even if it is continued under a different (non-Feuerbachian) name. Marx’s use of species-being “is a radical reconceptualization of the philosophic tradition’s use of the idea of a human essence,” and constitutes “a genuine theoretical innovation that functions as the centerpiece of Marx’s view of human beings and their society.”⁸⁹

As Wartenberg notes, many traditional philosophers have considered the human essence from the standpoint of their “specific natures,” which corresponds to the use of species-being in Feuerbach. If a human being, for instance, is a rational animal, then following one’s rational capacities at the expense of one’s animal nature “manages to fulfill the specific character of one’s being.”⁹⁰

I have shown how Marx upsets the Feuerbachian reliance on ahistorical ideas as the basis of human essentialism. The question remains: what is the *new* basis that human essentiality is rooted in?

⁸⁹ Wartenberg, Thomas E. “‘Species-Being’ and ‘Human Nature’ in Marx.” *Human Studies* 5, no. 2 (1982): 77-95.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Certainly, there remains a concept of human essentialism. If there was no concept in Marx, there would be no use of the term species-being. Furthermore, there would be no conception of alienation, which consists in the contradiction between man's existence and his unrealized essence.⁹¹ As Wartenberg puts it, the "human being is the specific creature it is in virtue of possessing a specific character"—an *essence*—"which Marx calls its species-being. Only in virtue of this species character can the human being be seen as the distinctive type of creature which it is."⁹²

But what *belongs* to this species-being is quite different. For it is not thought, as it was in Feuerbach – not *simply consciousness*. It is, rather, man's "free conscious activity," that is, it is "labor in accordance with one's own conscious deliberation."⁹³

What belongs to man's species-being, then, is "free conscious activity." Labor—an action—replaces contemplation as the determination of man's essence. And rather than seeing labor "only as a brutal necessity forced upon human beings by their animal natures," Marx understands labor to be a "positive, creative activity."⁹⁴ This is the essence of Marx's break with Feuerbach: that contemplation becomes displaced by activity, that frozen ideas are substituted by the process of labor. It also precludes Marx's critique of capitalistic production: that humanity, coronated as a distinct being by virtue of its conscious existence, reduces itself to an animal-like state as labor, far from being exercised as manifest human potential, exists to serve ends extraneous to it (*viz.*, the *abstract* ends of profit for profit's sake).

⁹¹ Leogrande, 143

⁹² Wartenberg, 79

⁹³ Wartenberg, 79

⁹⁴ Wartenberg 80

4.4 | ARRIVING AT A NEW CONCEPT OF HUMANITY

Marx, of course, abandons Feuerbach's way of talking about the human essence. The date Althusser gives to the abandonment of the concept is more or less correct: after the *Theses*, Marx no longer refers to species-being or the human essence in this way.⁹⁵

Yet although it is true that Marx no longer *speaks* about species-being, Marx's discontinuity with Feuerbach's conceptual terms can be attributed to two factors. The first is given by Wartenberg: that he "desire[d] to distinguish his own theory from that of Feuerbach."⁹⁶ The second, however, is that he simply needed new breathing room for the content he could no longer contain in the term 'species-being.' To put it another way, Marx *inherits* this vocabulary, but the contents of these words has undergone a shift. Rather than mediating species-essence on trans-historical ideas, Marx puts it on a new, social-historical axis, and *only after* does it become apparent that a new conceptual apparatus is required.

Wartenberg agrees with this to the extent that he recognizes that, "although he took the notion of a species-being from Feuerbach, he developed it in a radically different direction."⁹⁷ But we can see this in Marx's *own* works, where Marx makes explicit claims about human beings qua human beings, despite being moved beyond Feuerbach's Young Hegelian terminology. In Volume I of *Das Kapital*, Marx writes that,

⁹⁵ Leogrande, 139-140

⁹⁶ Wartenberg 89

⁹⁷ Wartenberg, 83

We pre-suppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will. And this subordination is no mere momentary act. Besides the exertion of the bodily organs, the process demands that, during the whole operation, the workman's will be steadily in consonance with his purpose ... The less he is attracted by the nature of the work, and the mode in which it is carried on, and the less, therefore, he enjoys it as something which gives play to his bodily and mental powers, the more close his attention is forced to be.⁹⁸

Das Kapital, the pinnacle of Marx's 'mature' works, is still saturated by a notion of labor that belongs *exclusively* to human beings, and that this furthermore *marks it off from the animal kingdom*. Belonging to man's essence, in both the Marx of 1867 and as it was in 1844, is an *exclusive* form of labor that is constituted by "free conscious activity," and it is a free conscious activity that is social in nature and conditioned by its historical context. Even further, Marx will write in Volume III of *Capital* that human beings will, in the future, labor "under conditions

⁹⁸ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, V. I* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, USSR; translated by Samuel Moore and Edward Averling), 127

most favorable to, and worthy of, their *human nature*,” but that it will “nonetheless still remain a realm of necessity.”⁹⁹ In the case of his critique, it is such that labor is in a form that is akin to *animals*, a product of production purposed towards anti-social and purely private ends.

In both cases, hidden behind the language of political economy Marx *nonetheless* maintains a concept of species-essence that belongs to human beings, if only called by a different name. This concept of species-essence, however, is rooted in social-historical determinations of man’s *actual activity* rather than trans-historical ideas as in Feuerbach. The movement away from Feuerbach is a repetition of Feuerbach’s movement from Hegel: from abstract and one-sided humanity to humanity as it actually exists, as it exists *in the world*. Mankind is not considered from the standpoint of the isolated individual, abstracted from his life-world: *man is the world of man*.¹⁰⁰

After all considerations, we are left with the following: what belongs to man’s species-being—the unique *comportment* towards the world that belongs to humanity—is that the world of man is constituted by man’s own actions and practices. And despite being responsible for these actions and practices—because they are *his*—they confront man in an alien way that escape immediate control. “As far as Feuerbach,” Marx says, “is a materialist he does not deal with history, and as far as he considers history he is not a materialist.”¹⁰¹ Marx’s overcoming of Feuerbach hinges on his situation of man’s *social* being in historical developments.

⁹⁹ Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, V. III: The Process of Capitalist Production as a Whole* (NY: International Publishers, 1959), C. 48

¹⁰⁰ Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*. Retrieved from the Marxist Internet Archive (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>)

¹⁰¹ Marx, *A Critique of the German Ideology*, 20

5 | THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS

Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. Hence, in *The Essence of Christianity*, he regards the theoretical attitude as the only genuinely human attitude, while practice is conceived and fixed only in its dirty-Judaical manifestation. Hence he does not grasp the significance of “revolutionary”, of “practical-critical”, activity.¹⁰²

-- Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*

Despite Feuerbach’s comparative disinterest in the politics of his day, the politically revolutionary basis for Feuerbach’s discoveries were not lost on Marx.¹⁰³ At the same time, Marx was clear, as we have seen, that Feuerbach’s break with Hegel was ultimately incomplete. Although Feuerbach *attempted* to find a concept of humanity that corresponded with living, actual humanity, Feuerbach instead premised man by abstract and trans-historical ideas. Feuerbach’s “whole deduction with regard to the relation of men to one another goes only so far as to prove that men need and always have needed each other,” i.e. it *proves* that man is social.¹⁰⁴ But the sociality that is arrived at is abstract and mediated by philosophical ideas,

¹⁰² Marx, Karl. *Marx/Engels Selected Works, Volume One, p. 13 – 15*. Progress Publishers, Moscow, USSR, 1969. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/theses/theses.htm>

¹⁰³ Marx, Karl. *Marx-Engels Collected Works, Volume III*. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive, https://marxists.architecture.net/archive/marx/works/1844/letters/44_08_11.htm

¹⁰⁴ Marx, *A Critique of The German Ideology*, 18

whose premises Feuerbach himself takes for granted. Feuerbach, in sum, was unable to understand how man's *social being* is shaped by the history of its own development.

Any political project, no matter its pretensions, is exclusively *human*. Aristotle writes how man—being “the only animal who [nature] has endowed with speech”—is by nature a political animal.¹⁰⁵ Whether the ends of the state are the good of the *polis*, to overawe the state of nature with a more tranquil orderliness,¹⁰⁶ or to “regulate and preserve property,”¹⁰⁷ the ends to which politics are ascribed are *inherently* human ends that give recognition to a reality beyond individuals. This is why politics is *Πολιτικά*, or that which concerns the *Polis*, a community which is of higher form than the household or the tribe (for the former is composed of the latter).¹⁰⁸

Political projects, whose object is humanity, must acknowledge humanity as it actually exists. Without taking into account a *concrete* concept of humanity—one that embraces what is essential about being human—government of men will not consider men as they actually are, but only as they exist abstractly and ideally. The question of man's species-being, then, acquires a *practical* significance.

In this section, I will consider both liberalism and idealistic variants of socialism from the standpoint of species-being as it is outlined by Marx. I will attempt to show how liberalism, on account of its focus on the individual and on individual rights, fails to properly recognize the social dimension of man's existence (5.1); likewise, I will show how idealist socialism fails to

¹⁰⁵ Aristotle 1253a10

¹⁰⁶ Hobbes 86-90

¹⁰⁷ Locke, John. *Second Treatise of Government*. Hackett Publishing Company, 1980. Page 8.

¹⁰⁸ Aristotle 1252a – 1252b

recognize how man's social being is historically determinant, thus in many ways repeating Feuerbach's errors in the political sphere (5.2). Finally, I will end this section signaling what a recognition of humanity *as it actually exists* might entail.

I should remark that I am intentionally considering both liberalism and socialism abstractly, i.e. in ideologically 'pure' forms removed from their historical instantiation. Although this may seem odd choice given the direction of my paper, I have done this for two reasons: first, that this is not a history paper, but a philosophy one; second, that I want to consider both liberalism and idealist socialism *as such*, i.e. to show why their *philosophical assumptions* insufficiently grasp man as man.¹⁰⁹ There are many forms of liberalism, just as there are many forms of its response in the shape of socialism. When considering liberalism *as such*, or what is common to idealist forms of socialism *as such*, it is necessary to abstract from historically instantiated and concrete existence and locate what is common to all of them. In this way, the *crux of the matter* can be illustrated more clearly. Only then can one return to the concrete, now with a better understanding of what it is one is studying.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ Marx, who aimed at a concrete understanding of modern bourgeois society, also undertook his project in *Capital* in this way. In his preface for the first edition, he writes how science, in order to lessen the affects of external influences, must "make experiments under conditions which ensure that the process will occur in its pure state" (Marx 90). Although his work remained empirically instantiated, in the first chapter (on the value-form), the work has a highly abstract character that considers values *as such*.

¹¹⁰ "The method of rising from the abstract to the concrete is only the way in which thought appropriates the concrete, reproduces it as the concrete in the mind. But this is by no means the process by which the concrete itself comes into being." Marx, Karl. *Outline of the Critique of Political Economy (Grundrisse)*. Penguin Books in Association with New Left Review, 1973. Retrieved from Marxist Internet Archive.

<https://www.marxists.org/subject/dialectics/marx-engels/grundrisse.htm>

5.1 | SANS-SOCIAL: WHAT MARX'S SOCIAL HUMANITY SAYS ABOUT LIBERAL INDIVIDUALISM

Liberalism can be understood in a multitude of ways depending on its context. Etymologically, *libertas* represents freedom from obligations, particularly in the form of servitude.¹¹¹ When Machiavelli speaks about liberality, he speaks of excessive openness and generosity, i.e. freedom from constraints ("stinginess").¹¹² When considered economically, liberalism connotes openness with regards to the economy, often in the form of a free and unregulated market. Social liberalism, when it is designated as such, often translates into openness and laxity with regards to traditions, mores, or social obligations of some kind. In sum, there is no exact definition, but rather a family resemblance across many instances that unite them as *liberal*. Due to this, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* questions whether liberalism is a comprehensive ideology or a political doctrine at all.¹¹³

These are questions which may or may not hold true, but when we consider liberalism in this paper, we principally mean the following: the *worldview* whereby the individual and individual rights is considered sovereign and indivisible. Or, more simply: the political ideology whose object is *liberty*, and whose political subject is *the individual*.

¹¹¹ Britannica, T. Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Libertas." Encyclopedia Britannica, January 14, 2008. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Libertas-Roman-religion>.

¹¹² Machiavelli, Niccolo. *The Prince*. University of Chicago Press, Second Edition: 1998. Translated by Harvey Mansfield. 62-63.

¹¹³ Gaus, Gerald, Shane D. Courtland, and David Schmidtz, "Liberalism", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/liberalism/>>.

Considered politically, liberalism translates to the Western ideology of human rights and liberal democracy. These are political structures which lend recognition to the sovereign individual, and which act as a neutral arbitrator between private individuals. For Locke, the community man belongs to is nothing more than an “umpire” which arbitrates the affairs of private citizens, whose autonomy *as private citizens* statehood is designed to guarantee.¹¹⁴ The state, then, guarantees the *rights* of its citizens; it has no positive being of its own.

In the liberal worldview, the individual *as such* is considered sovereign, his rights immutable, and his existence *as an individual* absolute. The state, by contrast, is little more than the guarantor (“umpire”) of these private individuals. Locke is explicit about this in his conception of the state as a result of individuals—“free, equal, and independent”—entering into communion with one another for the protection of their life and property.¹¹⁵ In his *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes about the state as “a union of an aggregate of men” where, through the construction of just laws, are each allowed the “lawful *freedom*” to pursue their own private ends.¹¹⁶ What unites liberals *as liberals* is that the subject of history and of politics is the sovereign individual: it is purportedly *individualist*, with society being nothing more than an aggregate of individuals with no positive being proper to it (i.e. *as a society*).

But if belonging to the human condition is that men and women are inherently social and *determined* by their social being, as I have attempted to illustrate in this paper, then liberal individualism’s emphasis on the individual becomes insufficient. It does *not* become insufficient

¹¹⁴ Locke 46

¹¹⁵ Locke 52

¹¹⁶ Kant, Immanuel. *Kant: The Political Writings*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1991. 138-139.

in its recognition of the individual, which is something empirically verifiable and endowed with actual existence. Rather, the failure lies in its inability to conceive of the social dimension as something more than a collection of abstract individuals and as something which the individual *is an individual of*. Because of this failure to properly consider the *social* dimension as something of a higher and determinant order with regards to individuals, which I have attempted to show forms a part of man's species-being for both Feuerbach and Marx, liberal individualism fails to take into account the individual *in actuality*; it fails in what it sets out to achieve.

Simply put, an individual is an individual *of something*. An individual is always an individual belonging to a *particular background*, with *particular traditions* and a *particular way of life*. The individual cannot abstract itself from its lifeworld: its ground of existence is non-negotiable, just as who one is born to is non-negotiable and objective.¹¹⁷ Outside of the realm of ideas, there is no such thing as the individual taken abstractly; there is no individual *as such*. There is no individual existing abstracted from their real, living context; only individuals with a determinate history, way of life, and being. We can repeat here Marx's criticism of Feuerbach in Thesis VI: "the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations."¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ By objective and non-negotiable, I mean that it is not something which can be arbitrated by thought. One can *relate* to one's origins—in the form of family or society more generally—by way of ideas, and through this relation, one can have an impact on the intersubjective relation between self and other. However, the actual *thrownness* by which individuals enter the world is not something that can be willed, rationalized, or overcome by way of arbitrary "free choice." Like any law of nature, it can only be surrendered to. In large part, this is exactly what Marx meant by the statement: *men make their history, but not as they please*.

¹¹⁸ Marx, Engels 145

The problem with liberal individualism, in sum, is that it does not exhaust the essence of what an individual actually is. The individual's own essence is not individually reducible, but lies in the *ensemble* of his social relations. What an individual is, is beyond it.¹¹⁹

Liberalism thus enters into a contradiction: it gives recognition to the individual abstracted from their substantive background, but it cannot recognize the individual as they exist concretely. If liberalism *does* consider the individual as it exists concretely, it must grant political recognition to a *social* reality more fundamental than the individual, and thus can no longer consider the individual as an abstract, autonomous sovereign being. This would no longer be pure individualist liberalism, but requires a polity that is socialistic in nature: social being and social interests, above and beyond the individual, would be *politically* recognized.

If it considers the individual abstractly, the wealth of particularity that substantializes the individual is pushed aside as non-fundamental, non-essential, and even detrimental to the flourishing of the abstract individual and their equally abstract "free choice," which *as a goal* is purposeless and has no meaning.¹²⁰ Aleksandr Dugin criticizes liberalism in exactly the same way, arguing that liberalism's call "to become liberated from all things external to oneself"

¹¹⁹ Cf. Locke: "The *natural liberty* of man is to be free from any superior power on earth" (Locke 17). Interestingly and in contrast with this, the Russian word for freedom—*свобода*—also has the connotation of identity, or self-sameness.

¹²⁰ Such notions are abstract because they are abstracted from their particular context and transformed into *ends in themselves*. Thus it is that the individual, abstracted from its lifeworld and social-historical context, becomes an end in itself; 'free choice,' divorced from its determinant context, is considered an inviolable goal *as such*. But choice is never choice for its own sake, and the individual is never an individual on their own terms. Choice is the will to *determine* something particular; the individual, rather than being a free-floating entity outside and beyond history, belongs to something greater than itself.

lends itself to the impoverishment of the individual and a resultant abstract, anti-human ideology that cannot recognize man *as* man.¹²¹

Liberal individualism, on account of its failure to recognize the individual's *social* essence as having real existence independent of individual men and women, fails in this regard to grasp man as a social being. It can only grasp man *abstracted* from his actual, social existence – which is no man at all, but an abstract subject emptied of all determinant contents. In 'liberating' man from the traditions, mores, and values that constrain him as an individual monad, the only rights left is the universalized, abstract right of "man separated from other man and his community," principally of liberty as the right to property.¹²² In so doing, the "only bond between men [becomes] natural necessity, need and private interest, the preservation of their property and their egoistic persons."¹²³ All political community is reduced to "a mere *means* for preserving these so-called rights of men," which, for Marx, is really the bourgeois citizen who has the means to *realize* these abstract and formalistic rights, i.e. to make them actual. Those who are without property of their own—those who had been removed from their means of subsistence in the form of agriculture or small production in the cottage industries—are guaranteed only the dead letter of the law while facing in their actual lives the law of the jungle: dog eat dog competition whose previous solace was in the motley feudal ties torn asunder by republican law, in the patriarchal relations of agriculture disrupted by the partition and enclosure of the peasant commune, and of the religious bonds felled by bourgeois

¹²¹ Dugin, Aleksandr. *The Fourth Political Theory*. Arktos Media, London: 2012. 38-39.

¹²² Marx, Karl; Friedrich, Engels. *On the Jewish Question*, 42. Although the contradictions of bourgeois, formalistic right are beyond the scope of this paper, Marx will go on to criticize this liberty as inconsistent and contradictory.

¹²³ Marx, Karl; Friedrich, Engels, 43.

rationalism. The reality of liberal, bourgeois law and its sacrosanct 'individual' is the destruction of those social bonds which made life meaningful for the majority of humanity, who *in actual fact* become a class of orphans for whom the guarantees of universal, bourgeois law remain a pipe dream.

As it 'liberates' itself from everything determinant about humanity, the individual subject of liberalism spirals ever closer towards nothingness. At its most extreme case, which we are considering here, liberalism is perfectly able to posit *freedom from* (the 'negative freedoms' of Jeremy Bentham), but—beyond the exception of private property—is unable to seriously posit a *freedom to* ('positive freedoms').¹²⁴ The latter—so-called 'positive freedoms'—are unique in that they determine *what something is*. In its pure form, liberalism—for thinkers like Dugin—dogmatically negates this 'whatness' itself, treating it as a backwards constraint on an otherwise sovereign and free individual.

Liberalism cannot give positive recognition to society or to social interests. It can recognize the "right of the *circumscribed* individual, withdrawn into himself," but it cannot recognize the right of a community to determine itself *as a community*.¹²⁵ As such, it proves itself *as an ideological doctrine* to be incompatible with what man *is*, viz. a being which is determined and shaped by his social embeddedness. The extent to which the social is recognized in liberal philosophies is the extent to which it is recognized as the of sum-total of sovereign individuals and their individual interests. Society *as a society* has no political recognition in liberalism, nor could it lest it become *socialistic* in nature.

¹²⁴ Dugin, 158.

¹²⁵ Marx, Karl; Friedrich, Engels. *On The Jewish Question*, 42

5.2 | SANS-HISTORICAL: CRITIQUE OF IDEALISTIC SOCIALISM

If liberal individualism—which locates political subjectivity in the individual *as such*—fails to embrace man as a socially-determinant being, then it is clear that any political project which seeks to represent man’s existence politically will have to be social in orientation. If liberalism is, formally speaking, the ideology whose object is *liberty*—in economics, in politics, or in personal conduct—then socialism is the ideology whose object is *society*.¹²⁶ Socialism, in this sense, simply recognizes that man is a socially determinant being and recognizes society *as* a society, not the sum-total of individuals living in it.

But while individualistic liberalism is, from the stance of Marx’s concept of humanity, *fundamentally* incompatible with actually existing humanity, idealistic variants of socialism fail to consider the other dimension of man considered in this paper: historical development. If liberalism forgets that man is socially determinant, idealist variants of socialism forget that man’s social being is *historically* determinant.

By recognizing man’s essence as belonging to society, socialism grasps society as a society and can conceive of social interests independently of private ones. However, without an understanding of society as caught up with and shaped by historical developments, the forms of sociality that are recognized by this socialism become static and quickly antiquated, no longer reflecting man’s *actual* social being but only an idealized and antiquarian view of them.

¹²⁶ I am not considering socialism in any sense other than ideologically, and I do this only minimally (i.e., that *all* forms of socialism share society as their object). Any consideration of a ‘socialist mode of production,’ or socialism as an *objective* phenomenon, is beyond the point of this paper.

Such a form of socialism is idealist because it considers society ideally. For idealistic socialism, social relations are conceived of as existing beyond history and beyond man's actual development. Similar to Feuerbach's mediation of the essence of man by way of ideas like Reason, Will, and Affection, idealistic socialism mediates man's social relations by ideas like Freedom, Equality, and Fraternity – or, in more reactionary variants (like fascism), by Volk, Family, and Fatherland.¹²⁷

Marx himself launched scathing critiques of these idealistic socialisms on multiple occasions, specifically on account of their abstract and insufficiently critical character. In his *Critique of the Gotha Program*, Marx calls the “idea of socialist society as the realm of equality” a “one-sided French idea,” which was “justified as a *stage of development* in its own time and place, but which, like all the one-sided ideas of earlier socialist schools, should now be overcome.”¹²⁸ In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx criticized “Reactionary Socialism”—both “feudalist” and “petty-bourgeois” types—as reactionary insofar as they were too fixated on *outmoded* relations in manufacture and agriculture, i.e. for *restoring* social relations that had lost their ground objectively. Most pertinently, Marx attacks “German or ‘True’ Socialism” on account of its representation of “the interests of human nature, of man in general” – concepts which exist “only in the misty realm of philosophical fancy.”¹²⁹

What all these forms of socialism had in common were two things: first, a recognition of the *positive* existence of man's social being; second, a fixation on social relations and

¹²⁷ *Travail, famille, patrie* was the slogan adopted by German-occupied Vichy France, as a mockery of the French motto.

¹²⁸ Marx, Karl. *The Critique of the Gotha Program*. International Publishers, New York: 1966. Pg. 32.

¹²⁹ Marx, Karl. *The Communist Manifesto*. Verso, New York: 2012. Pg. 68.

corresponding ideas which were, in the course of history, outmoded and made redundant.

German socialists “wrapped their sorry ‘eternal truths’” in beautiful phrases that, ultimately, only led to confusion as to their real relation to the established powers of the day.¹³⁰

Idealistic forms of socialism, in short, share with individualist liberalism a one-sided and abstract understanding of man. Unlike liberal individualism, these idealist socialisms comprehend man’s *social* being in a positive way. But like liberal individualism, the concept of man is an incomplete one that ultimately renders it *incompatible* with actually existing humanity. By fixating on forms of social relations that have been outmoded *objectively*—i.e., through forces that *are not up for rational arbitration*, namely economic relations—these forms of socialism idealize a *specific mode* of association between men and women and eternalize it, considering it the benchmark from which all human development should proceed from. In turn, they become reactionary: the idealized associations envisioned have no basis except in the subjectivity of the state, and as such they must be enforced artificially. The resultant ‘socialism’ fails to really account for man’s *actually existing* social realities, just as liberalism’s resultant individualism fails to really account for the wealth of actually existing individual.

Reactionary socialism is reactionary because its concept of social being is a *static one*, just as Feuerbach’s concept of humanity was a static one. Rather than a socialism which imagines its *own* premises to be ahistorical and removed from history, Marx’s conception of socialism is one which is dynamic and active but which—importantly—has an *objective* significance.

¹³⁰ Marx 69.

5.3 | RECOGNITION OF SOCIAL HUMANITY: MARX BEYOND IDEALISM

In the 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx writes that,

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past.¹³¹

In consideration of the kinds of socialism outlined above, we can reduce Marx's primary thrust to this: these socialisms, which were born out of the limitations of liberalism, fail to recognize that man *does not make history as he pleases*. Man is given a determinate being, and this being is shaped by the activity of real human beings. But despite facing history as a product of man's *own* development, it escapes direct control of him. One cannot dictate one's premises anymore than one can choose who one is born to. Social relations and forms of association that comprise the individual cannot be wished into existence anymore than they can be willed out of existence, because their existence *is not premised by thought* but in fact premise thought itself.

This is the elementary difference between Marx's materialist socialism and the idealist forms of socialism described above. For Marx, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness."¹³²

The 'mystery' as to why Marx makes scant claims about the contents of a future socialist

¹³¹ Marx, Karl. 18th *Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. [Marx/Engels Internet Archive](https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm#:~:text=Men%20make%20their%20own%20history,the%20brains%20of%20the%20living) (marxists.org) 1995, 1999; <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm#:~:text=Men%20make%20their%20own%20history,the%20brains%20of%20the%20living>.

¹³² Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Retrieved from the Marxist Internet Archive (<https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>)

society is, for this reason, quite simple: *these contents are not the product of thinkers and of thinking*, but are the product of *real developments* in mankind's material premises. Marx's project is not to *introduce* socialism, but to provide clarity into its objective necessity and development. Socialist political authority is only the political reflection of real developments in man's actual, material premises.

Idealistic socialism, in short, premises reality by way of ideas in the same way that Feuerbach premised *existing humanity* by way of ideas. The result in both cases is an impoverished, one-sided, and abstract conception. For Marx, by contrast, the forms of sociality that would be given recognition by some form of socialism could *not* be legislated. They could only result from real changes in the forces of production, a process which—like society in general—finds responsibility in individuals but escapes individual accountability (and thus follows a rationality of its own). Marx's scientific socialism, on the subjective side (as a self-consciously socialist society), can only *give meaning and recognition* to these developments and would *give meaning and recognition* to humanity as it passes through the threshers of modernity.

6 | CONCLUSION

It is easier than anything to fall into the trap that Marx abandons, in his older years, the notion of a human essence. While an epistemological break may have occurred in Marx's thinking, it would be wrong to consider that notions of a human essence disappeared in Marx's maturation as a thinker. Rather, as I have argued in this paper, the *fundamental* break between Feuerbach and Marx does not lie in whether humanity *has* an essence that is unique to it, but in the *meaning* of this essence. This *meaning*, in turn, will necessarily govern both thinkers' commitments to human emancipation, in terms of both vision and approach.

For Feuerbach, the essence of humanity existed as something beyond history. This is a result of thinking about humanity *only* abstractly. In so doing, Feuerbach falls into the trap of reifying existing humanity in the same way that religion reifies humanity's essence in *The Essence of Christianity*. Marx does not dismiss the idea of a human essence but sets it on a new axis. For in Marx, human beings have an essence, but it is not an essence that is fixed beyond human activity. The mode of being unique to mankind, viz. language/sociality, is not only premised by others, but is defined by its engagement with others and the activity of human beings producing and reproducing their daily lives: other men and women, who have a determinant history, a determinant way of life, a determinate *being*.

While thinkers like Althusser consider the elimination of species-being from Marx's theoretical vocabulary to be the elimination of ideas of human essentialism, I have attempted to show that there remains a notion of human essentiality in the late Marx. The abandonment of his Feuerbachian vocabulary, of which species-being is a part of, is only Marx's searching for

new theoretical independence and his attempt to ground his thinking in a new conceptual apparatus. It does not, as I have argued, mean that Marx has abandoned this philosophical idea, only that it has found a new basis and taken on a new form.

If it has been successfully proven that humanity has an essence that is social in nature and open to history—i.e. to the accumulation of its own activity and its own development—then political projects like liberalism and socialism will need to take this into account so that they can more accurately represent and govern men and women. The implications for Marx's socially and historically determinant humanity are that liberalism and idealistic socialism both share a fundamentally one-sided and abstract notion of humanity that stem from their failure to recognize certain aspects of humanity. Although this consideration of the *ideas* of both liberalism and idealistic socialism takes place in realm of abstraction and not from actual history—and, for that reason, could not possibly be exhaustive—when speaking about questions about what it means to be human and what that would entail, they are relevant questions worthy of exploration.

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