

Marx's Atheism and the Ideal of Self-Realization

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Feuerbach

This essay begins with a brief review of Marx's evaluation of Hegel and Feuerbach's understanding of God, focusing upon the human as a self-creator, not as created by God. The essay then turns to Peter Ehlen's evaluation in which he argues that Marx's concept of the human being as a self creator who transforms both the world and the self through labor has overemphasized the role of labor in creating objects for human usage and that Marx has neglected the self's relationship with others. The essay argues against Ehlen, drawing upon both the early and later Marx to emphasize the full and free development of the individual in relationship with others.

Marx evaluated Hegel's concept of *Geist*, of Divine Spirit, as partly false and partly true. What was false was that the Divine Spirit actually exists and that its potentialities of full rational understanding and freedom were being realized through the labor of abstract knowledge in Hegel's philosophy. What was true was that the human being's potential for rational understanding and freedom developed through human labor, social relationships, and language. Marx followed Feuerbach's evaluation of Hegel's concept of *Geist*. *Geist* was a symbol, not of a real Divine Spirit, but of the ideal development of the human potentials of rationality and freedom.¹ Marx saw Feuerbach's achievement as discerning that Hegel's philosophy was still a religious view of life, albeit worked out in philosophical reflection, and that it needed to be overcome by a philosophy that made "the social relationship of 'man to man' the fundamental principle of his theory."² Where Marx disagreed with Feuerbach was with Feuerbach's theoretical and abstract understanding of the essence of the human being as a species-being. Marx saw knowledge as primarily practical, related to a human being's labor upon the sensuous world, and therefore as developmental.³ Consequently, Marx also saw the essence of the

human being as a species-being as something which developed historically through human labor, social relationships, and language. Hence, Marx viewed the economic and social conditions of human history as having a profound effect upon the human potentials of rationality and freedom. What should be primary, argues Marx, is not Feuerbach's theoretical overcoming of Hegel's theology in an abstract atheism with moral platitudes based on the value of a human being as a species-being, but a practical overcoming of all forms of political and economic alienation. "The critique of religion ends with the idea that *man is a supreme being for man*. It ends, therefore, with the *categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions* in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being. . . ."4

In order to understand the fundamental moral imperative of Marx, it is helpful to identify what the highest need is in a world with God and then in a world without God. In a world-view in which God is creator, a human being's highest need is the need for God. As St. Augustine noted, the longings of the religious believer's heart remain unsatisfied until the believer is united with God. For God is perfect truth and perfect love, and the human being's mind and will are created by God to desire that perfection. However, in the world-view of Marx in which humanity is its own self-creator, a human being's highest need is the need to continue one's own self-creation through the development of one's own knowledge and freedom both in self and in others.

However, the common person has difficulty both in acknowledging that God does not exist and in discerning a human being's highest need. Marx writes:

A being does not regard himself as independent unless he is his own master, and he is only his own master when he owes his existence to himself. A man who lives by the favor of another considers himself a dependent being. But I live completely by another person's favor when I owe to him not only the continuance of my life but also *its creation*; when he is its *source*. My life has necessarily such a cause outside itself if it is not my own creation. The idea of creation is thus one which it is difficult to eliminate from popular consciousness. This consciousness is *unable to conceive* that nature and a human being exist on their own account, because such an existence contradicts all the tangible facts of practical life.5

However, when popular consciousness comprehends that it creates its own life through its own rational understanding and free control of both the labor process and its social conditions in communism and when humanity comprehends the evolution of the human species through science, then the human person will have "the evident and irrefutable proof of his *self-creation*, of his own *origins*."6 Consequently, although popular consciousness can understand some aspects of the moral imperative to change all social and economic circumstances in which a human being is alienated, the common person will not see that religious belief is also a way in which he is alienated from self-realization until he fully comprehends human evolution and history as the process of human self-creation. Hence, the knowledge that the moral imperative of human self-

realization is not founded upon a belief in God as the creator of a human being is partially dependent upon human comprehension of the practice of human labor and science.

Ehlen has raised a significant objection about the adequacy of Marx's concept of a human being as self-creator. Ehlen suggests that Marx has overemphasized the role of labor in creating objects of value for human use and that Marx does not see that dying to save the life of another is of much greater value than any object created by human labor.⁷ "The paradigm inherent in the Marxian emancipation is that of the dominating Creator who carries out his will sovereignly in the world and thereby proves himself as God. It is not the image of the Christian God who reveals Himself in self-sacrifice."⁸ Ehlen questions whether the value of a human being for one's own sake can be sustained in a universe in which a human being's self-creation is a chance development of evolutionary circumstance on this planet.⁹

Ehlen's evaluation neglects Marx's insight that self-realization in both self and other becomes a human being's highest need. Human evolution does begin with labor to change nature into objects of value for human use, but human labor, consciousness, and freedom continue to evolve, and the greatest wealth is found in the other person.

True human wealth is found not in a human being's sense of having or possessing things or money but in the development of one's humanity. The sense of having things and controlling people through one's money gives an illusory fulfillment; money appears to give the person qualities which he does not have. "My own power is as great as the power of money. . . . What I *am* and *can do* is, therefore, not at all determined by my individuality. I am ugly, but I can buy the *most beautiful* woman for myself. Consequently, I am not ugly, for the effect of *ugliness*, its power to repel, is annulled by money."¹⁰ Money may enable a person to purchase works of art but will not develop that person's ability to appreciate art, and money may enable a person to purchase a beautiful courtesan but will not develop that person's ability to love or be loved.

The illusory fulfillment founded on money and the sense of having should give place to the true fulfillment founded upon the development of one's true human abilities of *rationality* and *freedom*. "If you wish to enjoy art you must be an artistically cultivated person; if you wish to influence other people you must be a person who really has a stimulating and encouraging effect upon others. Every one of your relations to a human being and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual* life."¹¹ A person who wishes to enjoy art has the responsibility of developing her *rationality* so that she understands the traditions of art and also of developing her own *freedom* so that she appreciates artistic creativity. In a similar manner, a person who wishes to be a significant influence upon other people has the responsibility of developing her *rationality* so that she understands others' needs and also of developing habits of character that enhance her own *freedom* so that she can stimulate others to develop similar habits. Also, a person who wishes to be loved as the unique person she is by another has the responsibility of developing her *rationality* and *freedom* so that she learns to understand and to respect the uniqueness of the beloved as well as of herself.¹²

The evolution of human nature from a prehuman state begins with labor to satisfy basic life needs of food, drink, and shelter, but the evolution of rationality and freedom through labor, language, and social relationships gives rise to the development of true human needs calling for the fulfillment of rationality and freedom both in self and in others. Marx writes:

It will be seen how in place of the *wealth* and *poverty* of political economy comes the *wealthy man* and the plenitude of *human need*. The *wealthy* man is at the same time one who *needs* a complex of human manifestations of life and whose own self-realization exists as an inner necessity, a *need*. Not only *wealth*, but also the *poverty* of man acquires, in a socialist perspective, a *human* and thus a social meaning. Poverty is the passive bond which leads man to experience the need of the greatest wealth -- the *other person*.[13](#)

Real wealth is found not in the sense of having money or things but in the sense of being and of needing to be a person whose capacities of rationality and freedom are being developed through one's own practical relationships with nature and social others. Similarly, real poverty is found not in the sense of not having money or capital but in the sense of being a person who needs the real wealth of other persons, namely, their fully developed rationality and freedom.

To treat things, money, or capital as the real wealth that human beings should seek is to make a fetish of these commodities; it is to endow these things with a quality of being worthwhile for their own sake whereas they are or should be only means useful for the development of human rationality and freedom. Rotenstreich explains that Marx's evaluation of the fetishism of commodities comes from Kant's understanding of the different kinds of ends of human action.[14](#) He quotes Kant:

In the realm of ends, everything has either a price or a dignity. Whatever has a price can be replaced by something else as its equivalent; on the other hand, whatever is above all price, and therefore admits of no equivalent, has dignity. That which is related to general human inclinations and needs has a market price. . . . But that which constitutes the condition under which alone something can be an end in itself does not have mere relative worth, i.e., a price, but an intrinsic worth, i.e., dignity.

Now morality is the condition under which alone a rational being can be an end in itself, because only through it is it possible to be a legislative member in the realm of ends.[15](#)

True wealth, true dignity, that which is beyond any price and for which the market has no equivalent is that which is worth seeking for its own sake. What is worth seeking for its own sake is not the value of the self for its own sake, nor the value of the social other or community for its own sake, but the universal value of the human self in every rational and free being. The universal valuation of every human self in moral consciousness is the

only condition under which a human individual can be truly valuable for the self's own sake. For if one individual does not value the rationality and freedom of every human self, then there is nothing illogical about another individual not valuing the rationality and freedom of the first individual. If the first individual can treat a second individual simply as a thing, as that which has mere relative worth, as that which has a price, there is nothing illogical about the second treating the first in the same way. So the only way in which human selves can have dignity, a value which is beyond price, a value of being worthwhile for their own sake, is through the universal or moral valuation of every human person as worthwhile for that person's own sake. So if the deepest human need in an individual is for self-realization, that is, for the development of the value of the self-consciousness and self-choice as worthwhile for their own sake, then this deepest need is also the need for other persons as valuable for their own sake in their own self-consciousness and self-choice. For an individual cannot logically value oneself as beyond price unless one also values all other human selves in the same manner.

In contrast with my reading of Marx through Rotenstreich, Althusser sees the later Marx breaking with the humanism of the early Marx, affirming that in "1845, Marx broke radically with every theory that based history and politics on an essence of man."¹⁶ He emphasizes the sixth Thesis on Feuerbach where Marx argues that there is no human essence inherent as an abstraction in each individual, but that the reality of the human essence is the ensemble of human relations. In contrast with any bourgeois or Christian *personal* humanism, Althusser proposes a socialist personal humanism as an ideology which plays on the words, "personal humanism." He sees ideology as a necessary element in the ongoing historical development of any society, and he notes that Marx affirmed in *The German Ideology* that the concept of human nature involved a hidden coupling of the human and the inhuman. What is important about socialist personal humanism is not a set of concepts or theory for others to analyze, but concrete, practical movements in an historical epoch for Marxists themselves in which they reject the inhuman even as they work to affirm the human.¹⁷ Such a contemporary socialist humanism is:

*A rejection and a denunciation: a rejection of all human discrimination, be it racial, political, religious or whatever. It is a rejection of all economic exploitation or political slavery. It is a rejection of war. This rejection is . . . also and primarily turned inwards: to the Soviet Union itself. In personal socialist humanism, the Soviet Union accepts on its own account the supersession of the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but it also rejects and condemns the 'abuses' of the latter, the aberrant and 'criminal' forms it took in the U.S.S.R.*¹⁸

Consequently, even though Althusser sees Marx rejecting the essentialism of his early humanism, he still finds a basis in Marx's contrasting of the human against the inhuman in *The German Ideology* for a real, practical socialist humanism which involves the rejection of any form of discrimination and exploitation, including that of religion.

However, even if we were to accept Althusser's reading of Marx's break with

essentialism in his concept of human nature, a strong argument can be made, following Kain and supporting the socialist humanism supported by Althusser, that the "science of the later Marx does not replace his earlier humanism; it replaces his earlier metaphysical concept of essence."¹⁹ Kain notes in support of his reading of Marx that the *Grundrisse* talks about production not only transforming the object an object such as raw meat into cooked meat, but also as transforming the subject who produces and enjoys that object. Implied in this insight, Kain affirms, is that individuals would make themselves ends in themselves in a socialist society and "would begin to create the conditions which would allow them to control their own subjective development as individuals, to control and direct consciously the unfolding of their own historically created needs, powers, sensitivities, and knowledge."²⁰ Both in his early and in his later writings Marx affirmed the moral principle of universal respect for every person, writing that the development of the productive forces in capitalism:

creates those material conditions, which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle. In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms, we shall have an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.²¹

By dividing people into classes and by reducing human relationships in economic matters to a commodity relationship in which the productive labor of individuals is bought and sold as a thing, capitalism has violated the inherent dignity of persons that needs to be rationally and freely expressed in their productive labor and their social relationships. However, communism, by using the rich productive powers developed by capitalism, can create a higher form of society in which the rationality and freedom of every person in both productive labor and in social relationships should be respected.

In summary, the ideal of self-realization, that is, the ideal of the development of human rationality and creativity through a human being's own action, is expressed by Marx in his concept of the wealthy person. The wealthy person is not one who possesses things like art or one who controls people in a large business or one who purchases the services of various purveyors of consumer goods. Rather, the wealthy person is one whose rational understanding of and creativity in art have been developed, one whose rational understanding of and creativity in science, technology, and business have been developed, and the one whose rational understanding of and creativity in the enhancement of other persons have been developed. The wealthy person is one whose deepest need has become the need for the enhancement of the rationality and creativity of others. The only way in which a person can have this true inner dignity of being a rational and creative being is that the person treat all other persons as having the same dignity in their rationality and freedom. Unless an individual adopts the Kantian universal community of all persons as intrinsically worthwhile for their own sakes, the individual's own worth and the worth of other selves become mere commodities, to be bought and sold in the marketplace. Capitalism has harmed human dignity and reduced the human person to a commodity, and by his ideal of self-realization, Marx affirms that the inherent

dignity of the human person needs to be fully activated through the comprehensive development of the person's rational understanding of and creativity in productive labor and social relationships.

According to Marx, a human being's self-understanding will then exclude the need to worship God. For a human being will now perceive the self as one's own self-creator. Ehlen's criticism was that Marx overemphasized labor upon material objects in a human being's self-development and that he did not see that unselfish love of another is the highest form of self-fulfillment, especially as exemplified in dying to save the life of another. My response to Ehlen's evaluation has been that he did not see that Marx's ideal of self-realization found its highest expression in Marx's redefinition of wealth and poverty. The greatest wealth is found in being a person whose own rationality and creativity enhance the rationality and creativity of other persons.

Although Marx saw the significance of love and self-sacrifice, Ehlen may still have pointed to a significant problem in Marx's thought. What will sustain people in their lives of love and self-sacrifice, an evolutionary universe of chance or one of Divine purpose? Philosophers such as Alfred North Whitehead and theologians such as Teilhard de Chardin have developed theories of evolution in which human self-creativity is conceived as rooted in Divine creativity and in which the highest human being need is to find such roots. Nevertheless, Marx's thought is a profound affirmation of human dignity in an evolutionary world.

Notes

1 Bernstein, *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1971) pp. 38-39.

2 Marx, 1844 *Paris Manuscripts*, in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, pp. 316-317; quoted in Bernstein, *Praxis and Action*, p. 39.

3 Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *The German Ideology* (New York: International Publishers, 1970) p. 122.

4 Marx, "Introduction to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law and Critique of Religion," in Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1961) p. 220.

5 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, in *Marx's Concept of Man* p. 138.

6 Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 139.

[7](#) Peter Ehlen, "'The Human Significance and Dignity of Labor': A Keyword in Marxian Anthropology," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 29 (1985) p. 44.

[8](#) Ehlen, "'The Human Significance and Dignity of Labor': A Keyword in Marxian Anthropology," p. 44.

[9](#) Ehlen, "'The Human Significance and Dignity of Labor': A Keyword in Marxian Anthropology," pp. 44-45.

[10](#) Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 165.

[11](#) Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 168.

[12](#) Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, p. 168.

[13](#) Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, pp. 137-138. Marx certainly saw the need for love of another as a person and not as the object of one's own appetite in his analysis of the relationship of man and woman:

The relation of man to woman is the *most natural* relation of human being to human being. It indicates, therefore, how far man's *natural* behavior has become *human*, and how far his *human* essence has become a *natural* essence for him, how far his *human nature* has become *nature for him*. It also shows how far man's *needs* have become *human* needs, and consequently how far the *other* person, as a person, has become one of his needs, and to what extent he is in his individual existence at the same time a social being [Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* p. 126].

[14](#) Nathan Rotenstreich, *From Substance to Subject: Studies in Hegel* (Martinus Nijhoff, 1974) p. 119.

[15](#) Rotenstreich, *From Substance to Subject*, p. 119; cf. Immanuel Kant, *Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Thomas K. Abbott, (Indianapolis: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1949) pp. 51-52.

[16](#) Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Pantheon books, 1969) p. 227.

[17](#) Althusser, *For Marx*, pp. 227-236.

[18](#) Althusser, *For Marx*, p. 237.

[19](#) Philip J. Kain, *Marx' Method, Epistemology, and Humanism: A Study in the Development of His Thought* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company, 1986) p. 121.

[20](#) Kain, *Marx' Method, Epistemology, and Humanism*, pp. 121-122.

[21](#) Marx, *Capital*, Vol. I, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (Moscow: Progress, 1954) p. 555; Marx and Engels, *A Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in *Collected Works*, Vol. 6, p. 506; in Hilliard Aronovitch, "Marxian Morality," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, X,3 (Sept., 1980) pp. 360-361.