

THE CONCEPT OF HUMAN ESSENCE

IN

HEGEL AND MARX

By

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Abstract

Postmodern thought has staked much of its claim to originality upon a critique of the concept of essence in previous philosophical systems. This critique is based upon the claim that essence has and must function as a reductionist and transcendent category. In so far as traditional metaphysics has applied this concept to humanity, it has inevitably posited the truth of humanity in a static and ahistorical manner. The following thesis has attempted to problematize the postmodern reading through an examination of the works of Hegel and Marx.

Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* is a revolutionary philosophical text in so far as it presents human history as a process in which the human community produces and transforms its essential nature. The human essence is transposed from an abstract realm superior to history into the very midst of historical being. Hegel's analysis discloses that the human essence is the capacity for self-creation, or, in other words, positive freedom. History is understood to be the human struggle to make this essence a socio-political reality. In the course of this struggle the essence is itself transformed in the various attempts to make it a living reality.

If the human essence is the unique capacity to create oneself, then the dynamism implied takes on a critical function. It provides an evaluative criterion to measure given societies as regards freedom which is immanent to these societies and does not have to be imported from any

abstract moral or religious system. The flushing out of the critical potential of this concept, left unrealized by Hegel, is the primary philosophical contribution of Marx. through a further concretization of the concept, Marx is able to establish a contrast between what a given society concretely offers its citizens, and the potential it creates but cannot, for systemic reasons, realize. Because the essence is rooted in the practical conditions of existence, it is a non-arbitrary, verifiable tool of critique. Furthermore, because it reveals how the self-creative character of humanity is artificially limited, it is also non-dogmatic. No definite way of living is prescribed, the sole imperative is to establish a society in which the material preconditions for the free self-realization of all individuals are met.

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Everlastingly chained to a single little fragment of the Whole, man himself develops into nothing but a fragment, ... he never develops the harmony of his being, and instead of putting the stamp of his humanity upon his own nature, he becomes nothing more than the imprint of his occupation or of his specialized knowledge.

Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*

Let nothing be counted good, although, as always, it may seem really helpful, and nothing henceforth be considered honourable, except what changes this world once for all: it needs it. Like an answer to their prayers I came to the oppressors! Oh, goodness without results! Unnoticed attitude! I have altered nothing. Swiftly, fruitlessly vanishing from this world I say unto you: Take care that when you leave this world you were not only good but are leaving a good world.

Bertolt Brecht, *St. Joan of the Stockyards*

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Chapter One: Postmodernism and Essentialism

The tension between history, in which all that is must change and pass away, and philosophy, which has laboured to discover that which is permanent beneath the world of appearances, is nowhere more apparent than within the postmodern critique of the concept of essence. Postmodern theory has posited an unresolvable contradiction between the dynamic character of history and what is in their reading the static character of the concept of essence. History and philosophy, at least as traditionally practised, stand therefore in an irreconcilable tension. In so far as philosophy has sought after the substantial and permanent truth of things, it has been forced time and again to retreat from the manifold of historical being and take refuge in one or another abstract and immutable space, the space where the essence is supposed to exist. It is true that the concept of essence has in large part been employed as a transcendent, static concept. The confinement of this central philosophical category to a closed ideational realm is not necessary, however.

It must be stressed before this investigation proceeds any further that the interpretation of essentialism to be expounded does not claim to be an adequate treatment of the entirety of philosophical thinking on this subject. It is therefore quite possible that thinkers other than Hegel and

Marx have approached a dynamic concept of essence. The turn in Western philosophy represented by Hegel and which will be crucial to the argument of this thesis should not be taken to mean that the concept of essence has been employed prior to Hegel in an exclusively static manner, or that there were not good reasons lying at the basis of earlier conceptions, (the desire to find the Good Life, for example).

Notwithstanding this possibility, the investigation of which is beyond the parameters of this project, it is not too much to claim that Hegel and Marx attempted to unite philosophical categories and historical practices in a way which had been unthought of earlier. It is this nexus which establishes their essentialism as unique.

Whatever the range of thought concerning essence may be, it is true that postmodernism has insisted that this concept has been, and indeed must be, employed exclusively as a transcendent, ahistorical, and reductionist concept. It is this dichotomy, as it is expressed in some of the paradigmatic texts of postmodernism, that shall be contested through an exegesis of the works of Marx and Hegel. It will be argued that within their work a unique rapprochement between the two poles of this seeming antithesis is reached. Hegel begins a revolution in Western philosophy which is brought to fruition in the work of Marx. This radical transformation results in a concept of essence which is i) non-transcendent, or grounded in human historical practice,

and ii) which admits of, indeed demands, qualitatively different and changing structures of realization in the social-material world. In order for the differences between the historical and dynamic nature of the concept of essence found in Hegel and more so in Marx, and the static and transcendent character assigned to it by postmodern theorists to be clear, it will be best to begin this investigation with a concise summary of postmodern thinking on the topic.

In the postmodern scene, the concept of essence has been castigated as both reductionist and dogmatic. It has been deployed in Western thought in a struggle against plurality, polysemy, and difference. Gary Madison expresses this critique of essentialism clearly;

The trouble with essentialism is that, as Sextus Empiricus already knew, it cannot but result in dogmatism... And dogmatism is oppressive because it legitimizes expertocracy and "rational terrorism," ie, the tyranny of those who claim to be "in the know." To be constrained by essences (which, as Nietzsche pointed out, are simply what some people in the past have said things are and whose statements over time have become fixed and canonical) is to be im-prisoned in a stagnant universe of stringently limited possibilities and fixed and unalterable meanings.¹

Madison implies here that a doctrine which has a place for essences has no place for differences or uncertainty. The role of essence is to isolate an abstractly universal, immutable identity; that aspect of Being which remains the

¹Gary Madison, "Coping With Nietzsche's Legacy," in, *Philosophy Today*, Winter, 1992, p.9.

self-same throughout all change and which rules out all that does not conform to it. In the absence of such an absolutely fixed stratum, Madison, and other postmodernists who shall be surveyed below, imply that the concept of essence becomes meaningless. The continual alteration of meaning which concepts such as freedom undergo in history seems to them to prove that essentialism is a false and arbitrary hypostatisation upon what is necessarily mutable. However, there is another possibility which is not entertained by the postmodern scene- an historical essentialism in which an essence is disclosed and developed by human action itself. This essence does not occupy a transcendent space, but neither does it recede completely into mere relativism. In the work of Hegel and Marx, it is disclosed how there can be a concept of essence which is itself historical, which establishes an identity across time and place but does not arbitrarily reduce appearances to an abstract, generic identity or artificially limit the possibilities of social development.

This is not considered as a possibility because, ironically, metaphysics, by which is understood any philosophical doctrine which seeks to base itself upon a necessary ground, is conceived in a one-sided, reductive fashion by postmodern theorists. A foundation which is fully grounded in historical practice is excluded from the beginning as a possibility. Jacques Derrida, one of

postmodernity's most celebrated savants, defines metaphysics in such a way as to make this identity apparent. He defines it as the search,

...for a centred structure,...the concept of play as based upon a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play.²

This central structure sought out by metaphysics and which is beyond the reach of play," ie, static, unaffected by the contingencies of the manifest world, is the essence. Since for postmodernity there is only play, ie, transformation and continual alteration of meaning, there can be no essence to things, for this requires an appeal to a realm beyond or beneath or behind historical becoming.

The primary concern of this investigation is not, however, with the concept of essence in general, but rather that aspect of essence which deals specifically with humanity. Despite the fact that postmodernism too has preoccupied itself with the traditional function of the human essence, its account has unfortunately overlooked the differentia specifica of the historical essentialism initiated by Hegel and brought to fruition by Marx. For the postmodern thinkers surveyed, the same metaphysical qualities of a priori fixity and abstract identity which impair the efficacy of essence in general pervade notions

²Jacques Derrida, quoted in, Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 1989, p.25.

of a human essence as well. As Richard Rorty sees this, the essence of human being has been posited over and over as, "a picture of an ahistorical natural centre, the locus of human dignity." This picture is one common to, "Greek metaphysics, Christian theology, and Enlightenment rationalism."³ While it is true that one can find such a picture within Western philosophy one can also find, as in the work of Hegel and Marx, a use of essence which is historical and which is critical of past usages. Unfortunately, Rorty fails to examine this other possibility, and indeed, appears to fall victim to the very reductionism he is otherwise critical of. Rather than investigate what these three schools had to say about the essence of human being, whether there were differences in content and what factors might have influenced the differences, Rorty is satisfied to note a formal identity, ie, they all sought for a permanent and universal quality to human being. As shall become apparent however, there can be radical differences of meaning between formally identical statements concerning the question of the essence of human being. Take for example the following two statements, both of which are identical in so far as they posit an essential identity between human being and the quality ascribed to this. To state "Humans are Good" is to reduce the essence of human being to an abstractly universal

³Richard Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 1991, p.176.

quality (assuming for the moment with ,for example Plato, that the Good must always be identical) which ignores the historical evidence to the contrary. To say the formally equivalent statement, "Humans are self-creative" leads to the heart of the possibility of human history and seizes upon an essence which is shaped and realized by human practice and is able to comprehend the different social, cultural, and political shapes in which humanity concretely appears. The philosophy which is grounded upon this is an essentialism of a new form as the second and third chapters of this investigation will labour to illustrate.

Rorty's failure to examine the specificities of the "Tradition" is symptomatic of a larger problem within at least some of the postmodern treatment of this question. This problem concerns the either/or strategy adopted by many philosophers with postmodern sympathies. One is either concerned with identity, and therefore with abstraction from the plurality of contexts in which humans are determined as specific beings, or one is wholeheartedly for difference, specificity, and particularity without any underlying common structure. One is either a metaphysician or an "archaeologist" in Foucault's sense, ie, a scholar who concerns her or himself with isolating the unique conditions which determine particular, local and always tenuous identities. Foucault's critique of the attempt to discover a unity and a direction within human history illuminates

clearly this theoretical Manicheanism,

Is there not a danger that everything which has so far protected the historian in his daily journey and accompanied him until nightfall, (the destiny of rationality and the teleology of the sciences, the awakening and progress of consciousness...) may disappear, leaving for analysis a blank, indifferent space, lacking in both interiority and promise?⁴

Human history is either made into an epiphenomenon of some higher teleology, or there is no direction, development or progress within it at all.

If one chooses to take the path opened up by the first side of this absolutist antinomy then one chooses also, according to the postmodern critic, to locate the truth of human life outside of the socio-historical human world. There is no way to unify essence and existence upon the profane Earth. Again it is Richard Rorty who unabashedly levels this charge,

... the Western philosophical tradition thinks of human life as a triumph just in so far as it breaks out of the world of time, appearance and idiosyncratic opinion into another world, the world of enduring truth.⁵

This triumph is the realization of a pre-existing goal, the realization of a telos which does not emerge within history, but determines history's course from the outside and the beginning. Essentialism must present itself as the narrative of the fall and redemption of humanity. As

⁴Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, (Tavistock Publications: London), 1972, p.39.

⁵Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*, p.29.

Derrida insists, "All metaphysics indissolubly co-ordinates teleology with eschatology."⁶

The words quoted above Derrida wrote in regard to Hegel. It can be contended, however, contra Derrida and postmodernism, that Hegel and Marx are, at least prima facie, rather harsh critics of "traditional philosophy." This prima facie evidence is misleading, however. In the postmodern reading there lies beneath the veneer of a critical attitude towards previous philosophical perspectives a deeper (essential?) identity between Hegel and Marx and Western metaphysics. With Hegel one sees history boiled down to the unfolding of Spirit, while Marx merely substitutes for Spirit the triumphal march of the forces of production. Both are paragons of modernist, rationalist thought whose primary trait according to postmodern critics is the reduction of events to an a priori schema which provides the key to the universal meaning of the events so reduced. This is the function of the metadiscourse, according to Jean-Francois Lyotard. With different contents, such a structure underlies all modernist metaphysical thought, Hegel and Marx included,

I will use the term modern to designate any science which legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse of this kind making an explicit appeal to

⁶Jacques Derrida, "The Ends of Man, "in, *After Philosophy: End or Transformation?*, Kenneth Baynes, John Bohman, and Thomas McCarthy, eds., (MIT Press: Cambridge, Mass.), 1987, p.137.

some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject...

That there are definite points of convergence between Hegel and Marx and the rationalist traditions of Western thought is of course true. Yet there are also important differences which for the purposes of this investigation acquire pre-eminent significance and which the postmodern understanding of the nature and function of the concept of human essence and the type of philosophical discourse it can inhabit fail to note.

The foregoing is offered as a brief exposition of some of the major criticisms levelled by some postmodern theorists against the concept of essence. To recapitulate these in concise form, the concept of essence, specifically human forms included, is said to be: i) a priori, discovered by complete abstraction from appearances and concrete historical dynamics ii) the ground of history which remains identical throughout all change iii) reductionist and dogmatic, and finally iv) a pre-existing goal which beckons humanity towards some transcendent realm.

The postmodernists surveyed above have objected to a use of the concept of essence which attempts to encompass the nature of human being within a single, unchanging predicate. If that is the only way to employ a concept of

¹Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis), 1984, p.xxiii.

human essence then the postmodernist critique has much merit, for it does not take much historical research to come up with large amounts of evidence to show that humans have changed, that they are neither always rational or Good and so forth. However, as the following exegesis of Hegel and Marx hopes to disclose, the concept of human essence can be removed from these abstract confines and be deployed as a dynamic principle which has its home in history and at the same time can claim justly to have a universal application.

In so far as the content of this concept can be derived from the movements of history, ie, from the actions of human subjects acting in the world as it is given to them and as they in turn make it to be, the concept of essence in Hegel and Marx is a distinctive and unique concept of essence. It is transformed from a transcendent, static, and limiting concept into a dynamic, historical concept lying at the heart of a theory whose aim is concrete human emancipation. This historicization does not impair its philosophical function of claiming to be the truth of human being in the two fold sense of being both humanity's differentia specifica and its highest possibility. As the ground of human being, it is a ground which alters and develops. As a goal it is not an abstract and merely utopian dream, but an historically emergent possibility; a goal which can be realized in a social system through collective human practice on the basis of previous socio-historical

developments. Together these two sides compose a concept which, while abstracting from the unbounded appearances of the totality of human history, does not exclude an understanding of difference. On the contrary, in its developed form in Marx, the concept will form the basis of a theory whose aim it is to establish a society in which the full development of human individuality and creativity is a living actuality.

Chapter Two: Hegel's Transformation of Essentialism

2.1: Essence in General in Hegel's Philosophy

That Hegel is a rationalist philosopher with deep roots in the traditions of Western metaphysics is unquestionable. It is also true to maintain that he shares a common project with this tradition, the discovery of permanent and certain truth. Yet, in the way he approaches this problem he effects decisive changes in the nature of this pursuit. This is particularly the case with regard to the concept of essence. The focus upon the nature of a specifically human essence will require that this inquiry concentrate upon *The Phenomenology of Spirit* for the most part. However, some general remarks concerning the changed logical structure and function of the concept in Hegel's work as a whole are in order as an introduction.

In the *Encyclopedia* version of the *Logic*, Hegel introduces the reader to the concept of essence with a rather occult definition. He defines it as, "Being reflecting light into itself," and, "simple self-relatedness."⁸ It is not possible here to delve to the bottom of the murky waters of Hegelian logic, although some

⁸G.F.W. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel*, Wallace, trans., (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 1972, p.207.

commentary upon this definition is obviously in order.

What Hegel describes above is essence as it first makes its appearance in things. As "simple self-relatedness" or the "in-itself" of things, the essence first functions as the definition of things, their sine qua non. It discloses what a thing is as opposed to what it merely is not. One could define a thing negatively, as not-x, not-y, and so forth until every other thing in the universe had been excluded. As extensive as this process might be, one would never discover what the thing is in its own right. This will not satisfy the philosophical need to know the truth of things in Hegel's view. Things, according to Hegel, not only distinguish themselves negatively from other beings, eg, x is not y, but also positively, eg, x is x by virtue of the traits which belong to it alone. A philosophical observation of the thing's own determinations, dynamics, and relations will lead to the discovery of the first moment of essence, ie, to a discovery of that quality of the thing which distinguishes it in a positive way, as this or that, from other beings.

This initial "reflection of the thing into itself" is not the complete content of its essence however. The essence of a thing is not fully disclosed in its simple differentia. Things are in a process of development in which they are related to other things as well as to themselves. To understand fully what a thing is, one must

observe its development, and through this discover the full content of its essence. The essence is not discovered by abstracting from the mutable "accidents," but from learning what these accidents disclose about the nature of thing. It is only through such a self-manifestation that the essence of things becomes apparent, "The Owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk."⁹ While the foregoing would not be alien to Aristotle, Hegel does not merely repeat the ancient master. For Hegel this metaphysical process becomes an historical process. Herbert Marcuse comments upon the historical dynamism inherent in Hegel's *Logic* with regard to essence:

Essence is essence only through appearing, that is, through emerging from its mere self-subsistence... Hegel conceives essence as a process in which "mediated being" is posited through the overcoming of unmediated being; essence has a history. And the critical theme of the history of essence is reactivated in the meaning of this history, in the movement from unmediated "Being," through "essence," to mediated existence.¹⁰

The essences of things are thus manifested in the course of their own development from what they are simply and potentially to what they are completely and actually. What is unique about this process from the standpoint of the human essence is that this developmental process is historical, ie, it is a process of self-conscious revelation

⁹G.W.F.Hegel, *The Philosophy of Right*, Knox, trans., (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 1967, p.3.

¹⁰Herbert Marcuse, *Negations*, (Beacon Press: Boston), 1968, p.67.

and discovery on the part of human beings themselves. The human essence will not reveal itself to be an abstract point of identity lying behind appearances. The essence as here theorized leads beyond that static universe which was said to be the home of essence. In order for the human essence to objectively exist, the meaning of human history will have to be learned and these lessons will have to be incorporated into the political structure of society and the nature of individual practice within this. Therefore, the realization of the human essence has historical, practical conditions and cannot be fully expressed in an abstract concept. In the movement to realize this goal, the initially abstract in-itself (which, as the opening arguments of Chapter Four of *The Phenomenology* will show is not arbitrarily posited but indicated by the natural interchange between a human being and the natural world) is unfolded into a richer totality.

That things are not in reality immediately what they are in essence also opens up a critical function for the concept of essence. Essence is explicated through the self-activity of the thing to which it pertains (which is why this concept applies best to human beings). In the attempt to make oneself in reality what one understands oneself to be in essence, a contradiction can open up between the given form of existence and the potentialities contained within the essence. The initial concept according to which one

acts is shaped by past action. In the course of history, new problems and challenges emerge which invalidate the prior form of the concept. Therefore, not only the action, but the essence which one strives to realize is transformed and made richer. The tension which opens up between one's actual environment and the possibilities which accrue to essence in the course of history creates a space in which a critical theory becomes operative. Such a theory reflectively appropriates the highest possibilities contained in the essence and deploys these against an inadequate actuality. It is true that Hegel does not himself exploit fully these possibilities, but the general historicization which the concept of essence undergoes in his work lays the logical foundations for the critical function of essence. In order to cash out this abstract treatment of these transformations, this examination will now turn towards disclosing the nature and function of the concept of human essence in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

2.2: The Phenomenology of Spirit as a Narrative of Human Self Creation

Notwithstanding the fact that the Preface to *The Phenomenology* was written after the text itself was completed, there are sound reasons for reading it as a Preface, ie, before reading the body of the work. Amongst the important hermeneutical guidelines found therein is Hegel's assertion in paragraph 17 that, "... everything turns on grasping the True not only as Substance, but equally as Subject."¹¹ Within the rich content of this dense statement is an assertion that the truth of the world cannot be discovered if the subject who attempts to come to knowledge of the truth treats her or himself as a passive receptor. The way in which one goes about searching for the truth affects the nature of the truth. This is so because the world is not only something in itself, but also something for the knowing subject. Modes of cognizing the object thus affect the being of the object for the cognizing subject. The truth emerges when a relation between subject and object is found in which in-itself and for-another have become one.

¹¹G.W.F.Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Miller, trans., (Oxford University Press: Oxford), 1977, p.10.

The general task of the *Phenomenology* is to disclose the epistemic steps involved in coming to understand this position. Hegel therefore sees the *Phenomenology* as a pedagogical text which will lead natural consciousness, ("the determination of consciousness by quite specific circumstances"¹²) to the threshold of Hegel's speculative science. The assertion that one must grasp the truth as just as much Subject as Substance has a significance which transcends purely epistemic concerns however. The claim also posits an ultimate unity in development between human subjects and the world which they inhabit. At root, it is a call to understand the world as the historical process of human action and corresponding attempts to comprehend it. Thus, *The Phenomenology* is centrally concerned with the development of knowledge within history. This development, in turn, is intrinsically related to the development of a specifically human community in history and, therefore, to the emergence and unfolding of a specifically human essence. Marcuse provides an insightful commentary:

The constant transition from philosophical to historical analysis- which has often been criticized as confusion or an arbitrary metaphysical interpretation of history- is intended to demonstrate the historical character of basic philosophical concepts.¹³

¹²Werner Marx, *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, (University of Chicago Press: Chicago), 1975, p.4.

¹³Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, Routledge and Keegan Paul: London), 1986, p.95.

In the case under consideration, the historicity of the human essence shall be disclosed through an examination of the dialectic of self-consciousness. In this examination, Hegel claims to "simply look on"¹⁴ while self-consciousness reveals its complete essence through its own activity.

Of course, Hegel is not an empiricist and his mode of observation is an active one. *The Phenomenology* is not a survey of every event of human history, but rather an attempt to highlight paradigmatic forms of human practice and interrelation in an effort to disclose retrospectively a direction to history. Indeed, until Chapter Six, Spirit, the text is not a chronological reading of actual historical societies. In the earlier Chapters, especially Chapter Four, Self-Consciousness, Hegel is only interested in verifying the general historicity of humanity and revealing why an understanding of human beings must take this into account. In the early going Hegel offers an abstract argument which labours to reveal how humanity has emerged from its natural origins. In so doing, he also reveals that humanity is a species which in essence is self-making. Once this point has been proved, he can move on to interpret the concrete historical moments of this process. By claiming to simply observe, Hegel is emphasizing that the dynamics described in the text are dynamics which have emerged from

¹⁴Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.54.

within history itself, and not simply from the ordering operations his text performs. If one takes Hegel at his word, the reader can see within *The Phenomenology* an important historical dynamic opened up which does function as an interpretation of actual history. Rather than dismiss the patterns he sees as arbitrary, it is perhaps more fruitful to read the text as an attempt to illuminate from within the infinite manifold of historical events those relationships which exemplify the path humanity has taken which has led from isolated individuality to the possibility of rational community. This dialectic of self-consciousness is an attempt to prove historically his claim in the Preface that;

...it is in the nature of humanity to press onward to agreement with others, human nature¹⁵ only really exists in an achieved community of minds.

Such an achievement would be the result of human practice itself, and not the self-realization of an essence which directed human history from without. Hegel aims to illuminate the process through which human beings come (or can come) to discover within their own history what they are essentially, and further, how this discovery can come to inform the construction of a community in which this essence is concretely realized.

The relationship of the text to history is therefore

¹⁵ *Ibid*, .p.43.

dialectical. There are two perspectives at work in the text: the perspective of the developing self-consciousness and the perspective of Hegel who, because he stands further along the historical process, can see what self-consciousness as described in the text can, if it looks back, but does not necessarily, see. The variety of shapes which self-consciousness composes itself into are, from the perspective of those shapes, independent of one another. History was not pre-ordained to follow the path that it has, but given that it has taken such a path, the philosophical interpreter is entitled to examine this path and tease out the universal meanings constituted therein. The moments can only be connected through the reflective actions of self-consciousness. Although it may appear at times that Hegel holds that the movement described in the text is one of the simple organic unfolding of an immanent essence, this is not in fact the case. The essence is developed through the actions of self-consciousness. The identity established is a reflexive identity- self-consciousness must itself turn back and learn that its present possibilities are the result of past action, and, on the basis of this knowledge, engage in new actions which attempt to overcome the limitations revealed by past modes of acting. If there is a connected story to be told about the history of humanity, this can only be told retrospectively, in a narrative which connects together the different self-subsistent shapes of self-

conscious experience and in this connecting reveal the sui generis logic of the development of the human essence. As Hegel argues:

Though the embryo is in-itself a human being, it is not so for-itself; this it is only as cultivated Reason, which has made itself into what it is in-itself.¹⁶

And later in the text:

Consciousness must act merely in order that what it is in-itself may become explicit for it; in other words, action is simply the coming to be of Spirit as consciousness. What the latter is in-itself, it knows therefore from what it actually is. Accordingly, an individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action.¹⁷

Although Hegel's use of the embryo metaphor can easily lead one astray into the belief that he is employing a simple genetic model whereby everything which becomes manifest was immanent from the beginning, his qualification and the second passage cited should reveal his distance from such a model. The actuality of the human being is dependent upon past human action, and not upon metaphysical necessity. The human is what it is because humanity has, as he says, "made itself into what it is in-itself." This in-itself is, as he says in the second passage, learned from what it actually is. In other words, the essence is reflectively appropriated and made the principle of action. The inability to realize the full potential of the in-itself

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.240.

then pushes self-consciousness on to other modes of action, and so on. As the exegesis of the text will argue, this making will be one in which this in-itself will develop. The historical process through which this occurs is not the fundamental immobility upon which history merely acts out, but rather, as Hegel says, "the Bacchanalian revel in which no member is not drunk."¹⁸ This is hardly the "static universe" of dogmatic fixity and closure which many postmodern theorists would have one believe is the truth of Hegel.

Hegel begins his argument for the general historicity of human subjectivity in Chapter Four with the human being posited as an isolated consciousness confronted by the totality of the external world. Before this point is attained, however, Hegel considers an abstract consciousness attempting to come to knowledge of the world. This consciousness attempts to come to know this world in the most certain and wide-ranging way possible. The first three chapters of the text, Sense-Certainty, Perception, and Understanding, need not be examined in great detail here. A brief synopsis will be sufficient for purposes of the argument concerning essence. What is most important for that task is that consciousness moves in Chapter One from treating itself as entirely passive in the knowledge

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

process, to grasping itself as a subject who constitutes the object of its knowledge. The movement is from empiricism to Kant's (and Fichte's) subjective idealism.

The third chapter treats of Kant's great insight that the world appears to us as a law governed system because it is structured to do so by the transcendental concepts of the understanding which must be employed in any judgement made about the world. The constitutive powers of the human subject have as their condition of possibility in Kant the transcendental unity of apperception. This is an aspect of the human subject which remains identical throughout all the different empirical experiences a subject may have. It is the "I" which must accompany all of a subject's representations if those representations are to be given to the subject as a coherent totality capable of being determined in respect of one of the Categories. For Kant, therefore, self-consciousness is an a priori condition of the possibility of knowledge, the "I" must remain identical if knowledge is to be possible.¹⁹

As such, the content and functions of self-consciousness in Kant have nothing to do with historical conditions. The subjective component of objectivity, the Categories and the unity of apperception, are a priori features of humans as such; they are logical and not

¹⁹See Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, (MacMillan: New York), 1987, esp. sections 16-19, pp.152-160.

practical constituents of the known world. In other words, for Kant, in contrast with Hegel, the human way of acting within the world, humanity's mode of social organization and so on, is not decisively involved in the cognition of this world. The transcendental components of understanding remain static from place to place and time to time. Although Hegel agrees that human subjectivity plays a constitutive role with regard to its objects, this cannot be comprehended in an abstract and ahistorical manner. Hegel therefore aims at exploring the historical development of self-consciousness to see how this world constituting ability emerges and unfolds. As Jean Hyppolite comments;

La conscience de soi n'est donc pas la tautologie sans mouvement du Moi=Moi, mais elle se présente comme engagée dans un débat avec le monde.²⁰

For Hegel, the unity of subject and object must not only be demonstrated as an epistemological necessity, it must become actual in a world where humans are conscious of their concrete unity with others, with society, and with the rest of external reality. The dialectic of self-consciousness is the demonstration of the necessity of this principle.

If this demonstration is to be successful, Hegel must disclose the concrete historical road along which humanity has travelled which has made such a situation a real, ie,

²⁰Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse et Structure de la Phenomenologie de l'Esprit de Hegel*, (Editions Aubier Montaigne: Paris), 1946, p.154.

actually realizable, possibility. The beginning of this road must be one which does not presuppose the conclusion. If it did, the result would not be historical, ie, contingent upon human practice itself. Hegel must therefore take as his starting point the human being in an undeveloped form, ie, as a being which is not rational, but is engaged in the fundamentally animal struggle with the natural world for survival. This is necessary because he is attempting to reveal how humanity has developed its rational powers through an historical process. Thus, he must begin the dialectic with a form of self-consciousness where none of these powers are presupposed. This form is named Desire by Hegel. As Desire, self-consciousness is a merely natural being. What Hegel is attempting to disclose here are the ways in which the human being first distinguishes itself as a being which is different from the animal. He hopes to locate in this first movement the grounds of human civilization.²¹

Thus, the dialectic begins with self-consciousness as an isolated being confronted by an indifferent natural world. This world appears to it as a relentless cycle of life and death which does not recognize the intrinsic significance of any of the individual living beings who are the moments through which the cycle is perpetuated. Self-

²¹See, *Ibid.*, p.39.

consciousness, as self-consciousness, is nevertheless conscious not only of this cycle, but more importantly, of its individual existence within this cycle, ie, it is conscious of itself as a specific living being. Thus, it must confront the world and take from it that which it needs to survive. Through this active negation of the world as given, the human begins to distinguish itself from the indifferent totality in which it exists. Self-consciousness, in satisfying its needs at the same time proves to itself that it holds the power of negation over natural substance. It sees what it wants and takes it from the world and thereby quenches its desire. Through this process therefore, self-consciousness experiences itself as a being-for-itself, as an independent and sovereign being. Hegel expounds this in the following manner,

... self-consciousness is thus certain of itself by superseding this other that presents itself to self-consciousness as an independent life, Self-consciousness is Desire. Certain of the nothingness of this other, it explicitly affirms that for it this nothingness is the truth of the other; it destroys the independent object and thereby gives itself the certainty of itself as a true certainty.¹²

The negative power displayed in this initial relationship is what self-consciousness is in its "simple self-relatedness." At this point, this power over the given appears to self-consciousness as its absolute independence from all other beings. The world is posited now as but a means through

¹²Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.107.

which self-consciousness can satisfy its own desires. To draw this together, what is disclosed here is the immediate shape of the essence of human being, what has been called its negative power, its power to alter that which presents itself. In more general terms this negative power is freedom. Self-consciousness, in satisfying its desire, at the same time posits itself as a being which is autonomous, free from external determination, and proves this by consuming the objects of its desire. The immediate shape of this essence is abstract individual autonomy.

However, in the activity through which self-consciousness seeks to prove to itself that it is an independent being, it ends up proving to itself the opposite. This tension is that between essence and existence which was described in general earlier. The human being proves that it is in essence a free being through its negative action (consuming the object of desire) towards external being, ie, it shows itself that it determines externality and not vice versa. In the form of Desire, however, the undeveloped practices through which this power is manifested result in a contradiction. The individual at first appears to itself as independent because it has power over those objects which it desires. Through incorporating these objects into itself, it appears to itself as the creator of its own reality. This is, however, not a relationship in which lasting freedom for self-

consciousness is possible. In truth, self-consciousness is not independent or autonomous because Desire is dependent upon the object desired. The negative powers of self-consciousness are not being employed freely for they depend upon the object desired for their realization. After one object has been consumed and a desire satisfied, a new desire emerges and a new object must be found. The free expression of the negative powers of self-consciousness as Desire are in actuality enslaved to the object. Hegel describes this inversion as follows:

In this satisfaction, however, experience makes it aware that the object has its own independence. Desire and the self-certainty obtained in its gratification are conditioned by the object, for self-certainty comes from superseding this other: in order for this supersession to take place, there must be this other. Thus self-consciousness... produces the object again, and the desire as well.²³

Self-consciousness thus learns both of the power which makes it a free being, and the limitations imposed upon this freedom when it seeks to realize these in a purely negative and egoistic manner. Self-consciousness cannot exist in a self-created world if it understands by this simply the consumption of any object which it desires. That would be to exist as a merely natural being, as an animal. Such an existence is not a free existence and thus self-consciousness, in order to give itself an objective confirmation of its freedom, must transform itself and its

²³ *Ibid.*, p.109.

relationship to the world. In short, self-consciousness must discover a relationship in which it can be free despite its dependence, as a natural being, upon the external world.

The need of human beings for one another, which becomes the central focus of Chapter Four, has two moments which correspond to these two aspects, the natural and the social, of human being. As natural beings, the necessary interdependence of humans is obvious. Humanity, viewed as a natural species, must reproduce itself. Thus, there is a natural desire, (sexuality), of humans for other humans. This relationship, in so far as it serves the natural function of perpetuating the species, is external to the individuals involved. It is not a relationship through which one is transformed or finds one's independence confirmed. This reproductive cycle mirrors, in miniature, the universal cycle of life. Hegel describes this cycle as follows:

Life consists in being the self-developing whole which dissolves its development and in this movement simply preserves itself.²⁴

Yet, as we have already seen, human beings distinguish themselves from this indifferent cycle through their negation of the immediate form of the given world. Indeed, this is at the basis of self-consciousness. The human being, as a self-conscious being, is not only conscious of

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.108.

the world, but conscious of itself and its relationship to the world. Thus, because a self-consciousness posits itself as an independent being, it requires from its relationships with the objective world confirmation of this in order that its certainty of itself be confirmed. We have seen why such confirmation is not obtained by self-consciousness in the form of Desire. Self-consciousness requires a different relationship to a different object if objective, lasting, confirmation of its independence and freedom is to be obtained.

Genuine freedom can only emerge, for Hegel, from a particular relationship between human self-consciousnesses. We must examine how he expounds this decisive argument. In unfolding the dialectic of Desire, Hegel abstracted from the totality of human beings a single self-consciousness. In fact, this form of self-consciousness exists alongside of other such self-consciousnesses. These beings must confront one another, and they first confront one another as limits, as mere objects to be overcome. As Hegel will prove, such an external relationship between human self-consciousnesses is untenable. It is, he will argue, a requirement of historical development, and therefore human freedom, that there arise a relationship of mutual recognition between human beings. To understand why Hegel adopts this position, it is necessary to concentrate upon the transformation of Desire from desire for an object to desire for recognition

from another subject.

In the consciousness of the object of desire, self-consciousness was at first conscious of an object devoid of independence or intrinsic value. In the consciousness of another self-consciousness, self-consciousness is conscious of a being with equal desires and powers. Self-consciousness may not admit this to itself at first, and may still treat another self-consciousness as an object, as we shall indeed see below. Notwithstanding this, Hegel indicates that in this relationship self-consciousness becomes aware of itself in a way which it could not be in relation to the object of desire. There is a reciprocity in this new relationship which was impossible in the earlier one because the initial object of desire lacked the ability to explicitly declare its own independence. In the transformed relationship, self-consciousness becomes aware that the other self-consciousness can treat it in the way that it treats the other self-consciousness. This reciprocity can be manifested in two opposite ways: either i) each treats the other as an object, or ii) each treats the other as it treats itself, ie, as an independent and free subject. The latter becomes historically possible only if the former is experienced. As Robert Pippin clearly comments:

We introduce, by considering this new element, the possibility of conflict, of opposed desires, and, even more importantly, that conflict alters the experience of desire itself for a subject. For a self-conscious

subject, the threat posed by another self-conscious subject is a threat, potentially, to any future satisfaction of desire. If this is so, such a threat requires not just a resolution of this or that conflict, but eventually a fundamental resolution, a securing of some practice of mutual satisfaction of desire, or mutual, and so finally rational recognition.²⁵

Hegel considered his contemporary society to be on the verge of such a rational rapprochement. This was, in Hegel's view, an historical achievement, the sum of the struggles of human beings to be free. The telos of which this would be the realization is a telos shaped by the historical practices and experiences of self-consciousness. As the human essence, freedom does not unfold itself from on high and determine from without the actions of human beings. Rather, on the basis of what has already been accomplished and against the problems revealed by past practices, human beings must self-consciously undertake those actions revealed as necessary for the existence of a community in which they would be free.

The possibility of mutual recognition which emerges into Hegel's philosophical narrative at this point brings him to the foundation of his concept of Spirit. Before offering a commentary upon the meaning of this concept, it is necessary to have before us Hegel's initial definition of it;

²⁵Robert Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism: The Satisfactions of Self-Consciousness*, (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge), 1987, p.157.

A self-consciousness exists for a self-consciousness. Only so is it in fact a self-consciousness; for only in this way does the unity of itself in otherness become explicit for it... A self-consciousness, in being an object, is just as much "I" as "object." With this we already have before us the Notion of Spirit. What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is- this absolute unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition enjoy perfect freedom and independence- "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I."²⁶

Mutual recognition, as it is manifested in a social order, described by Hegel above as the "I" that is "We" and the "We" that is "I" is the foundation of Spirit. This foundation is concrete and historical. As the definition implies, Spirit is an intersubjective relationship which unifies and defines a community and which has for its initial condition of existence the transcendence of the absolute egoism manifest in Desire. Spirit is, in its general nature, "[Hegel's] term of art for social existence, for collectively achieved practices,"²⁷ as Robert Pippin has interpreted this.

Spirit is, however, more than a general covering term for human sociality. It is also an evaluative concept, it is the essence of human being, free existence, expressed as an historical possibility and a goal. In this form, it is that, "achieved community of minds" which was referred to earlier in our comments regarding the Preface to *The*

²⁶Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.110.

²⁷Pippin, *Hegel's Idealism*, p.147.

Phenomenology, or, in the words of Henry Harris, "the rational human community which develops in history."²⁸ Although all community depends upon mutual recognition of individual self-consciousnesses, there are more and less perfected forms of this. Not every human social totality expresses completely the possibilities which are opened up as humanity develops its rational and creative powers. As these are developed, old modes of recognition are revealed as lacking and oppressive and thus are cast off in the interest of free existence. In the course of this experience, self-consciousness comes to understand more deeply and more clearly that its own independence depends upon the relationships it establishes with the other self-consciousnesses of its community. In this experience it will eventually learn that full independence requires that it extend to all other self-consciousnesses the recognition that it too desires.

Spirit, as such a rational community of mutually recognizing selves, is indeed a telos, but not one which is independent of and external to human history. It is dependent upon human agency for its realization. As Hegel notes in the definition above, self-consciousness must experience what Spirit is. In other words, through learning of its need for others, self-consciousness learns also of

²⁸Henry Harris, "Hegel for Today?" in, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, Vol.7. No.3., Sept. 1977, p.304.

its "spiritual" side. When it learns that, self-consciousness can turn its focus towards its relations with the legal, ethical, and political moments of the community, which are only possible given the social dimension of human being. In the text, these relations are expounded in Chapter Six, where Hegel considers the relation between self and community in a number of actual historical societies. The nature of this dialectic, and the problems which Hegel runs into in his conception of the structure of such a synthesis of individual and universal, will be considered later. First, it must be seen how self-consciousness first treats the other self-consciousness and the significance of this vis-a-vis the further development of the human essence.

Self-consciousness has learned of its need for another self-consciousness, but it has not learned that the other self-consciousness is its equal. This too must be proven to it through experience. In the initial confrontation each treats the other as but a means through which each's particular independence will be proven. Thus, a struggle necessarily ensues and it is a struggle to the death. Although the cost is high, self-consciousness must engage in this struggle according to Hegel in order to fully leave behind the level of desire. The human who wants to live like a human, ie, freely, must be willing to demonstrate this in a struggle to the death which proves that mere biological existence is not a human life,

And it is only through staking one's own life that freedom is won: only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness its essential being is not just being, not the form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life, but rather that there is nothing in it which could not be treated as a vanishing moment, that it is only pure being-for-self.²⁹

That self-consciousness risks existence for the sake of freedom reveals that it knows that the mere satisfaction of biological needs is not freedom, but it also reveals that it has yet to grasp the full content of freedom. The freedom vied for here is still abstract because self-consciousness still aims to realize this freedom as an isolated individual. Pure being-for-self has no content, it is not freedom to express and realize oneself objectively, but simply independence, freedom as merely being left alone.

A victory in this struggle is thus pyrrhic. In winning independence from the other, the victor loses that which was necessary to confirm this independence in a lasting manner. The mere physical conquest of others and the negative freedom of solitude do not prove to be an adequate realization of the human essence, and thus further development is required.

The relationship which emerges from the struggle to the death is the famous dialectic of master and slave which is highly significant for our purposes because the concept of human freedom is here filled for the first time with a

²⁹*Ibid.*, p.114.

positive content. A relationship of servitude exists in history when someone submits to a stronger power rather than risk life. In the initial configuration it therefore appears that the master is the more human of the two self-consciousnesses for it was he who was willing to risk his life. The slave, on the other hand, valued existence more than freedom and thus submitted to the rule of the master. Hence it appears that in the bondsman the lord is conscious of his actual independence. The creature before him lives only to provide for the lord's needs. Every expression of the servant's life appears to be a confirmation of the power of the lord. Once again, however, this shape of recognition is one-sided and inadequate.

This mode of recognition is inadequate because the servant does not freely recognize the independence of the lord but is rather compelled to do so under pain of death. Thus, in the bondsman the lord does not receive a permanent confirmation of his being-for-self but rather of his own dependent situation. This dependency exists in two forms: i) the lord is physically dependent upon the servant in so far as it is the servant who provides for the lord's desires and ii) the lord is still dependent upon the object in the way that Desire was so that rather than being free, he is still trapped within the ephemeral mode of satisfaction which undermined Desire,

Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But

that is the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one,³⁰ for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence.

The lord remains the servant of desire while the servant of the lord learns how to become the lord of desire. In so doing the servant discloses the first, unmediated shape of freedom in a positive sense. The lord still negates the object abstractly, through consumption, the servant learns how to negate the object determinately, ie, to turn it into something else, through work. To grasp this completely, the consciousness of the servant must be explored.

In the experience of servitude the bondsman has not only been conscious of his subjection to the lord but also has been aware of the omnipresence of death, "the Absolute Lord."³¹ The fear of death plays a central role in the servant's transformation. The fear of death makes him conscious of his own existence and his desire to maintain this at all costs. In order to do this, the bondsman must hold in abeyance his own desires and work to provide for the lord's. Through work, therefore, which at first is merely a means to preserve his life, the bondsman transcends desire as the guiding principle of action and enables himself to begin the human task of creating a historical, humanly created world out of the world of nature. In this

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.118.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.117.

transformative process the servant too is changed, in so far as he becomes conscious of this new power,

Now, however, he destroys this alien negative moment, posits himself as a negative moment in the permanent order of things, and thereby becomes, for himself someone existing on his own account.³²

The radically transformed nature of the concept of human essence in Hegel's thought is most apparent with that concept's expansion to include the self-creative character of the human being. In general form that is precisely what the dialectic of lordship and bondage reveals. The freedom of the human being is contained in our capacity to transform the world, and thus also ourselves, according to a concept of our own determination. "La conscience de soi existe comme puissance négative, elle n'est pas seulement une réalité positive,"³³ comments Hyppolite. Human self-consciousness is not a static thing or transcendental structure existing quietly within the permanent order of things. It is rather an active agent of transformation of the given world according to human reason. With this expanded content, the human essence now contains the demand for positive freedom, for the freedom to make one-self according to one's own designs. It is true that Hegel will pull back from the more radical consequences of this,

³² *Ibid.*, p.118.

³³ Jean Hyppolite, *Genèse et Structure de la Phénoménologie de l'Esprit de Hegel*, p.160.

indeed, he will end up in a rather conservative position. Nevertheless, by here arriving at the human basis of history, Hegel prepares the philosophical ground for the development of Marx's critical theory.

In this transformation of the servile consciousness through its own activity the road along which the alien, external character of the world can be transcended becomes more apparent. The rational transformation of the world through work and scientific-philosophic investigation increasingly transforms the immediate natural world into an historically constituted and conceptually known world. In so far as this externality and its limiting character is overcome humans can be said to have moved towards a freer state of existence in general. Thus, there is an intimate connection between reason and freedom, both of which are historically developed. As Marcuse comments,

...the nature of man requires freedom, and that freedom requires reason is not a truth imposed on man by an arbitrary philosophical theory but can be proved to be the inherent aim of man, his very reality. Its proof is not advanced by the external process of knowledge but by the history of man.³⁴

That this is not merely dogmatism on the part of Hegel and Marcuse can be established by considering briefly some important moments in the "history of man," which support such an interpretation.

Take for example the growth of scientific knowledge and

³⁴Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p.99.

the explicit links established between rationality and political liberty during the Enlightenment. This is not to deify science or to ignore problems of unchecked technological rationality, it must be noted. Nevertheless, science has enhanced human life in many ways: by bringing people together through improved transportation and communication, it has the potential to free us of many of life's tedious and dangerous tasks, it has increased life expectancy through medical technology and a knowledge of the functioning of the body, and so forth. Politically, the Enlightenment demand for the rule of law formulated according to objective rather than capricious criteria, its insistence upon freedom of speech and debate etc., was a tremendous advance in the history of freedom, even if many of its principles go unrealized. To claim that these are advances for humanity is not to subject history to an arbitrary metadiscourse but simply to evaluate developments from the perspective of human freedom, itself an historically developed standard.

This development is by no means complete in *The Phenomenology* with the completion of the dialectic of mastery and servitude. Its resolution does not yield full positive human freedom. On the contrary, the dialectic which follows this is that between Stoicism and Scepticism. The Stoical self-consciousness retreats entirely from the external world and considers itself free only in its

abstract thinking. This represents a transition point in the text from a more or less explicit consideration of the intersubjective nature of freedom and its transformations, to the dialectical development of rationality in which freedom as an explicit theme drifts into the background. For this reason, the rest of Chapter Four and Chapter Five need not be examined in great detail, although a summary of their general significance should be offered.

Until Chapter Six, *The Phenomenology* is not chronological. The chapters preceding Chapter Six touched upon different facets of human history and connected these thematically. Chapter Four discussed the development of human self-consciousness from its beginnings as a creature of Desire, to a being who has become conscious of the creative character of its negative powers. In other words, Chapter Four illustrates the development of the human essence from its beginning as an abstractly negative power to its more developed immediately rational form. Yet, the synthesis of reason and freedom implicitly achieved here is not the final shape of this relation. From Stoicism through the end of Chapter Five, Hegel shifts his focus to the development of Reason in history, from its beginnings as the abstract universals of Stoicism which are steadfastly withheld from the world, to the gradual realization that the way of the world is intrinsically related to the way in which it is both conceptualized and worked upon by human

subjects. When self-consciousness has arrived at this point, it has come to consciousness of the fact that the human community is a self-constituting totality, and that the world is rational because it exists as it does by and for a community of rational beings. Charles Taylor highlights clearly the central content of Chapter Five:

In the previous figure, we learned to see the course of things as the result of the self-realizing actions of individuals; here [in Hegel's initial encounter with Kantian moral theory] we learn to see that the universal can come to be only through such self-realizing actions.³⁵

When this standpoint has been reached, the standpoint at which reality is grasped as what it is because it is established through the rational projects of human beings who exist in social formations, then "reason is certain of being all reality" to borrow one of Hegel's oft-repeated phrases from *The Phenomenology*. This simply means, as the quotation from Taylor shows, that the world, as a human world and not just a random scattering of matter, is the product of human activity. At this point, Hegel again shifts emphasis to concentrate upon the relationships, ethical and political, between the individual and the various historical societies he examines. Through these dialectics Hegel aims to disclose how and at what historical juncture self-conscious individuality becomes conscious of its intrinsic and necessary unity with the other members of

³⁵Taylor, *Hegel*, p.167.

its community.

The first two movements concern the world of the Greek polis and the Roman Empire. These societies display opposite problems with regard to the relation between individual and community. In the Greek city-state, (although it appears initially to be a complete realization of human freedom in so far as the individual sees itself confirmed in its laws and customs), the problem is a lack of space for individual autonomy. The previous chapter revealed that ethical autonomy must be a component of human freedom. From the more historically developed vantage point which understands this, the reason for the collapse of the Greek world is evident. In Rome, the opposite is the problem. Citizens lack any substantial unity. Each citizen is recognized as a legal person, but this recognition is abstract, it only concerns individuals in so far as they are property owners. In fact, there is complete alienation between the individual and the universal, which is embodied in the Emperor. The Emperor alone has the power to bestow recognition upon the citizens. His power is absolute and arbitrary. There is therefore no self-conscious unity between individual and Spirit; freedom in a positive sense is lacking.

The movement from this point on describes the attempt of the individual to regain what had been lost with the destruction of Greece, a form of Spirit in which the

individual found himself expressed and confirmed. This process leads to the Enlightenment and culminates in the French Revolution. It unfolds as a progressive expansion of the importance of individual reason to the point at which it considers itself to be all reality and posits an immediate identity between itself and universality. The gates of the Bastille have been reached and the French revolution erupts. It is also the point at which to return to a more detailed analysis of the text, for Hegel's treatment of the French Revolution is crucial for this project.

The Enlightenment culminates in the triumph of the principle of utility. The world loses its substantiality for the Enlightened consciousness, the truth of anything becomes simply its use-value. While judging everything at the court of subjective reason has the positive effect of stripping the absolute monarchy of its legitimacy, this form of self-consciousness also contains within it a danger. Self-consciousness identifies its own rational faculty with Truth. Politically this is expressed in the demand for Absolute Freedom, which Hegel believes to have been the guiding principle of the French Revolution. The immediate unity of individual and universal, (the attempt by the individual to identify its particular will with the will of the community), which is at the heart of Absolute Freedom entails that the absolutely free society can have no representative institutions, no articulation into classes,

etc, for any of these would be mediations and limitations upon what is by definition immediate and unlimited. As Hegel explicates this form of self-consciousness:

In this absolute freedom therefore, all social groups or classes into which the whole is articulated are abolished; the individual consciousness which belonged to any such sphere, and willed and fulfilled itself in it, has put aside its limitation; its purpose is the general purpose.³⁶

Once again freedom becomes abstract because it lacks a specific content. This has disastrous consequences according to Hegel.

By resisting mediation and articulation, self-consciousness as Absolute Freedom can achieve no positive results. The Bastille can be toppled and Versailles sacked, the ancien regime swept away completely, but no viable new order can be created. To create a functioning society articulation is necessary, for an individual simply cannot be immediately one with the universal. The individual cannot accomplish all the tasks which exist within a concrete universal. Government and so forth require the sharing of duties within the various branches of which it is composed. Because the general will cannot be so articulated, its sole function is a destructive one.

In order to accomplish even this task, the general will must be embodied in an agent. This cannot be anything other than a faction, for once one group claims to be the

³⁶Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.357.

repository of the general will, everyone outside of this group becomes an actual or potential enemy. In this way the Revolution degenerates into the reign of the Committee of Public Safety, the Law on Suspects, and finally the Terror. This bloody chapter in the history of Spirit is brought to a close once again by the fear of death. People, after witnessing the Terror, realize that Absolute Freedom in this abstract form is an impossibility and thus they return to an articulated totality in which each plays only a particular role,

These individuals who have felt the fear of death, of their absolute master, again submit to negation and distinction, arrange themselves in the various spheres, and return to an apportioned and limited task, but thereby to their substantial reality.³⁷

At this point the preceding summary of Chapter Six should be tied back more closely to the philosophical problematic from which the exegesis began.

The realization on the part of self-consciousness that to enjoy freedom in a positive sense, ie, to be a self-realizing being, it must accept performing a particular social task, that, in other words, freedom, to be concrete, must be limited, is of the greatest significance for Hegel's concept of the human essence. One sees here, in the return to a limited project, self-consciousness coming to understand how its unity with the others and with the social

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.361.

totality is to be achieved in an organic way. A concise recapitulation of the development of the human essence which has been unfolded will aid understanding of the claim above.

The human being first distinguished itself from the animal when it turned against the natural world, posited itself as an independent being in the cycle of nature, and proved this to itself by turning its negative, transformative powers against the world in a destructive fashion. Yet in this relationship what was to be proven, the freedom of self-consciousness, was not proven. The power to transform the given world which is first disclosed in this moment must become more developed, more rational, and socially articulated. Because this requires historical development, freedom, in a developed and more perfected sense, thus becomes a goal of human self-consciousness. The quest to live freely transforms the content of human freedom as well as the humans searching for it in the ways that have been described above. The problem of realizing freedom in its most developed form creates the problem of the relationship between the individual and the ethical, political, and legal systems through which the unity of individuals is made real for individuals. Absolute Freedom tried to resolve this by cancelling the need for an organically articulated universal in which the individual was a particular moment altogether and absorbing the universal into itself. This fails and self-consciousness

realizes that its unity with the universal, which is still the goal, cannot exist where Spirit appears as external or limiting to the individual. Spirit must become the home of individual self-consciousness in which self-consciousness sees its own reason expressed and its own freedom to be a self-realizing subject preserved. This does not mean, for Hegel, that the individual can thus simply do whatever the individual wants. That would be to return to Desire. Rational autonomy demands that freedom be realized within a concrete social formation in which there is an organic differentiation of tasks. This organic articulation, Spirit, is at once the product of the various individual projects, and the universal substance which provides the means for individual self realization,

The labour of the individual for his own needs is just as much the satisfaction of the needs of others as of his own, and the satisfaction of his own needs he obtains only through the labour of others. As the individual in his individual work already unconsciously performs a universal work, so again he also performs the universal work as his conscious object, the whole becomes, as a whole, his own work, for which he sacrifices himself and precisely in so doing receives back from it his own self.³⁸

In order to clarify this relationship between individuality and universality and the way in which freedom is to be found in the universalization of an individual task, let us take an example.

Take for example the work of a civil servant.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.213.

Understood in his or her individuality, he or she has a name, has likes and dislikes, has a defined job, and has definite feelings about this task. On the other hand, the significance of the job he or she does transcends its specific significance for the individual. As a functionary employed to implement the decisions of the governing power, this work has a universal meaning and is dependent for its existence upon the social totality in which it exists. Such a position is inconceivable in the absence of governmental system which requires that its decisions be mediated to the population governed. This system, in turn, is irreducible to the individual desires of the particular people who compose the society. The decisions which are realized through the work of the civil servant concern the common life of the members of the society. Thus, through his or her particular work, the individual takes on a significance for others and for the social totality. It is likewise with every other member. Farmers and bakers exist for others and for the whole as the providers of nourishment, civil servants as the mediators of legislative decisions and so forth.

We can see in this example the dialectical relationship between individual and universal. A civil service would not exist if there was no need for a governing body to formulate the laws which govern human interactions. On the other hand, there would be no concrete, effective laws were there

not individuals who governed and individuals who realized the decisions taken by the governors. Freedom, for Hegel, requires that one ascend to consciousness of the universal moment of one's "limited and apportioned task." Freedom cannot be identified with the individual side of the equation because this is a private domain, under the rule of arbitrariness, ie, it is akin to Desire. The individual is a reality for others and for the social totality in his or her universal functions. That which an individual manifestly expresses him or herself to be in the public domain is what he or she is. In so far as a social totality makes provisions for individual determination of the particular tasks through which one will be for others, to that extent the whole is the substance through which one receives a universal identity. The individual, in concretely realizing this identity through his or her own activity, is free in a positive sense for Hegel. Through this action, he or she creates him or herself and strengthens the bonds which unify the social totality.

The significance of the dynamic and historical nature of the concept of human essence in Hegel has already been commented upon. In that discussion it was noted that Hegel ends up undermining the radical force of defining the human essence as humanity's self-creative capacities. It is apparent now how this subversion takes place. By insisting that freedom in a positive sense can only be found by

raising to consciousness the universal significance of one's particular task, Hegel begs the question concerning the adequacy of each task, considered in its specific nature, to the self-creative capacities which define human beings as such. Certainly there is a universal moment to garbage collection, but garbage collection as such leaves unrealized, or at very least unexplored, the self-creative possibilities of those who are compelled by economic necessity to live their lives stowing away the refuse of others. This problem, and Marx's solution, will be the topic of the following chapter. In order that this be clearly understood, a summary of the positive achievements of *The Phenomenology* vis-a-vis the historicization of the concept of essence must be presented.

Hegel is fully aware that he has not presented the whole content of history in the dialectic of Spirit in *The Phenomenology*. His aim is not to reduce humanity to the figures in which it appears in this text. The text itself is a selective arrangement of human actions and societies which hopes to reveal how reason and freedom have been developed by humanity itself. As historical, however, each moment of the dialectic described in *The Phenomenology* is a totality unto itself whose development and disintegration is self-sufficient and contingent,

Their presentation, regarded from the side of their free existence, appearing in the form of contingency,

is history.³⁹

The task of the philosopher is to distil from the study of history those universal features of human being whose development, when grasped retrospectively, appears as a connected and necessary process.

That humanity is not fully formed in its inception, that its history is a process of encountering and overcoming limitations and that through these struggles humanity itself is changed, is the central insight of *The Phenomenology*. To know essentially what human beings are, one must study what they have made themselves to be. Therein lies the decisive critical insight of the text. Herbert Marcuse sums this up clearly:

...the essence is a product of a concrete development, something which has become. And the impact of this historical interpretation shakes the foundations of Idealism.⁴⁰

It shakes the foundations of Idealism, (that it is ultimately philosophical knowledge and not specific modes of practical activity that overcomes the external and alien character of the world) in so far as it discloses that the essence of human being is its capacity for self-creation. This disclosure points the theory which posits this in the direction of a radical practice which would be directed

³⁹Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, p.493.

⁴⁰Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p.148.

against social formations which oppress, rather than enhance, this essential nature. It does not topple the edifice, however, because the relationship between specific modes of activity (garbage collection etc.) and full self-realization is left unexplored. By failing to investigate specific modes of self-realization, the radical content of Hegel's insight is muted and eventually lost. In the end, from the perspective of a critical theory based upon this transformed concept of essence, the Hegelian oeuvre is a contradictory one. This notwithstanding, the historical and critical side of this contradiction nourished the emergent critical philosophy of Marx. It is to an examination of his critique of Hegel and his concretization of Hegel's concept of human essence that this study will now turn.

Chapter Three: Marx and the Human Essence:
Productivity or Creativity
3.1: Marx's Critique of Hegel

Hegel's *Phenomenology* disclosed the essence of humanity as its self-creative character and revealed how this entails the necessity of positive freedom for the human essence to be a fully manifest reality. In shifting the essence from one or another static abstraction to this dynamic principle, Hegel found a way to reconcile the metaphysical features of essence ie, essence's claim to be the truth and highest possibility of human being, with the actual dynamics of human history. Unfortunately, because he fails to see that, although all social tasks have a universal moment, some can provide greater opportunities for self-realization, and, because he also fails to investigate how opportunities are divided up in society, Hegel's philosophy ends up a conservative one. *The Philosophy of Right* cashes out the conservative implications of Hegel's understanding of the French Revolution. It is from an awareness of the tension between the radical implications of the understanding of humanity as essentially self-creative, and the conservative confines into which Hegel ends up imprisoning this, that Marx launches his critique of Hegel. This critique is an immanent one which turns the radical method of Hegel against his conservative conclusions. The examination of this critique will begin with Marx's 1844, "Critique of the

Hegelian Phenomenology and Philosophy as a Whole" and conclude with the 1843, "Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law [Right]." This inverted order has been chosen at the behest of Marx's claim that *The Phenomenology* is the, "true secret and origin of the Hegelian philosophy."⁴¹

Marx begins his 1844 critique with an affirmation of the critical and historical nature of *The Phenomenology*. At the same time, however, he laments the abstract character in which the self-creation of humanity is presented. The abstract nature of the text does not invalidate its claim to derive philosophical concepts, particularly that of the human essence, from human action itself, but it does undermine the critical potential of the text. As Marx points out,

...despite its thoroughgoing negative and critical appearance, and despite the genuine criticism contained therein, which often anticipates much later developments, there is already latent in *The Phenomenology* as a germ, a potentiality, a secret, the uncritical positivism and the equally uncritical idealism of Hegel's later works- the philosophical dissolution and restoration of the existing empirical world.⁴²

The later uncritical positivism will be discussed below. For the moment it is important to take note of the manner in which Marx feels the "genuinely critical" character of the

⁴¹Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, (International Publishers: New York), 1977, p.173.

⁴²*Ibid.*, p.176.

text is manifested.

Marx locates this critical character in Hegel's disclosure of the self-creative nature of humanity. It is worth quoting Marx's precise words to make clear that it is this dynamic side of Hegel which Marx appropriates and transforms, and not the absolute edifice of Hegel's *Logic*. Marx writes,

The outstanding achievement of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is that first Hegel conceives of the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation, that he grasps the essence of labour and comprehends objective man- true, because real man, as the outcome of man's own labour.⁴³

As shall become apparent, a theory which bases itself upon such a dynamic concept of the human essence is incompatible with the claims of Hegel's *Logic* to have uncovered the basic and unchanging dynamics of all of Being. Rather, it must stay focused upon the concrete dynamics of human history and investigate the particular modes in which the self-creative powers of humanity are structured in given societies in order to see if essence and existence are in unity.

Hegel's concern is not with the specificities of different socially structured modes of human self-creation. His concern with the practical side of self-creation is quite general, ie, labour is that through which humanity

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.177.

determinately negates the permanent order of things to create a historical world out of the natural one. As such, labour is always a form of alienation in so far as through it reason is separated from the subject and invested in the world. There is no question of overcoming the alienation of reason from itself through labour by creating a different form of labour. This alienation is only transcended in the grasp of labour's necessity in a rational system of meaning. This does not alter the character of labour as such, however, nor does it concretely alter the life of those whose "apportioned task" it is to perform labour in definite contexts. Freedom for the labourer consists in consciously grasping the universal character of his work, (in understanding that he sustains the whole through his particular task) and not in changing the nature of his or her work. There is no specifically alienated mode of labour which could be replaced by a non-alienated mode for Hegel. Marx expresses this by claiming that Hegel, "sees only the positive side, not the negative side of labour."⁴⁴ In other words, he does not see that under certain conditions labour is not an expression of free self-creation, but the opposite, instrumental activity in the service of another. Such a form of activity could indeed have universal significance, but this alone cannot make it free. Nor is

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, p.177.

the implicit freedom of labour, as in the master- slave dialectic, a sufficient condition for concrete positive freedom. An authentically free practice must occur in a social space free from all political and economic coercion. Not only the philosopher who understands the meaning of labour, but the labourer too, must grasp how it is through creative practice that humanity is most fully human. In order for the labourer to grasp this, the objective social impediments to self-realization, eg, private ownership of the means of production, must be overcome. Hegel does not concern himself sufficiently with these problems. Thus, Hegel does not see that full positive freedom has as another, and central, condition, non-alienated labour in the sense which will be outlined. As Istvan Meszaros comments,

Hegel, in the end, assigns the same characteristic of untranscendable absoluteness and universality to the alienated form of objectification as to activity itself.⁴⁵

This conflation of alienated and non-alienated modes of self-realization lies at the root of Hegel's "uncritical positivism." If freedom for the labourer consists only in coming to consciousness of the necessity and universality of his work, and not in a definite form of working, then self-creation, which should be the very hallmark of human freedom, is reconciled with with manifestly unfree

⁴⁵Istvan Meszaros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, (Merlin Press: London), 1970, p.49.

conditions ,ie, capitalist labour. It is this inability to distinguish free and unfree ways of working which lies behind Marx's charge that , "Hegel's standpoint is that of modern political economy."⁴⁶ Like the political economist, Hegel understands the general transformative and wealth creating character of labour, but fails to appreciate that this alone is insufficient to understand what free labour is, or would be if conditions permitted.

This limitation in Hegel's understanding of the essence of human being leads him in the direction of the "uncritical positivism" of the *The Philosophy of Right*. This is revealed when Hegel posits the Prussian state as the realization of full human freedom. That it was a false supposition was revealed to Marx by the struggles against it which emerged in his own day. Of course, Hegel cannot be faulted for failing to anticipate later events. He can be faulted, however, for advancing a position which entailed that human development as far as the social structure necessary for positive freedom was concerned, was finished. As Marx comments,

Hegel is not to be faulted for depicting the nature of the modern state as it is, but for depicting that which is as the nature of the state.⁴⁷

⁴⁶Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p.177

⁴⁷Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law [Right]," in, *Marx- Engels Collected Works*, Vol.3., (International Publishers: New York), 1975, p.43.

His depiction of the modern state as the realization of human freedom manifests clearly the latent conservatism found already in *The Phenomenology*. Hegel's claim that for positive freedom to be concrete it must be limited and specific is developed in *The Philosophy of Right* into the position that one's freedom is found in one's duty towards the state. Duty, Hegel writes,

is primarily behaviour towards something which is for me substantial and which is intrinsically universal... my obligation to what is substantial is at the same time the form of existence of my particular freedom.⁴⁸

Hegel here achieves the opposite of what he intended. Rather than overcome the abstract character of Absolute Freedom, he has emptied the notion of positive freedom of any orientation to the self-creative capacities of the human being in so far as these must take into account the concrete practices of every individual in a society. These instead have been reduced to performing one's duties towards the state. This is indeed a mode of self-realization, but it is not yet a completely free mode, because there is no guarantee that duty towards the state and fulfilling individual self-creative possibilities will coalesce. The radical implications of his general understanding of self-creativity, (because human beings are self-creative to be free in the positive sense means realizing this essence

⁴⁸Quoted in Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law [Right], p.7.

according to a self-determined plan), are irretrievably lost in *The Philosophy of Right*.

Lost also is the negative and critical character of the logic of human self-development as it is displayed in *The Phenomenology*. In *The Philosophy of Right*, Hegel deploys his dialectical logic in order to legitimate the Prussian state even though it is manifestly inadequate if it is compared to what is entailed by a deeper reading of his own concept of the essence of human being (self-creativity). Hegel expounds the structure of the Prussian state employing the categories of his *Logic* in order to reveal how this state stands at the end of the development of the Idea of freedom in history. While it may have been an end for Hegel, emergent struggles against the monarchy and the existence of democracy in France, America, and England revealed that it was not the end of history. Hegel describes the Prussian state as a complex system of mediations which ensure its unity and harmony. The Universal interest is maintained by the Monarch, who is mediated to the people by the bureaucracy. The realm of particular interests, civil society, is similarly mediated to the Universal through the estates and corporations, Prussia is presented as the most sublime, "I" that is "We" and "We" that is "I."

Hegel, as Marx will reveal, has here concealed contradiction beneath mediation. This is especially the

case with regard to the monarch. Hegel presents him as the embodied universal, but in fact he is merely one part imposed arbitrarily upon the actual whole, the citizenry. The existence of democracy reveals the inferiority of monarchy because it reveals the monarch as unnecessary. That which is unnecessary can be superseded. That which can be superseded cannot be the highest developed form:

Democracy is the truth of monarchy, monarchy is not the truth of democracy. Monarchy is necessarily democracy inconsistent with itself. Monarchy cannot be understood in its own terms, democracy can. In democracy, none of the elements attains a significance other than what is proper to it. Each is in actual fact only an element of the whole *demos* (people)(sic). In monarchy one part determines the character of the whole.⁴⁹

If one part determines the character of the whole by virtue of being more powerful, then the self-creative being of humanity is not being adequately expressed. Equality and democracy are further conditions necessary for the full development of the human essence. A philosophy which attempts to cover over this and maintain that positive freedom is compatible with unequal power and opportunity, where some people, because of the given political arrangements, have access to more possibilities than others, has given up any critical role it may have played.

Marx, basing himself upon the dynamic moment of Hegel's *Phenomenology* sets out to create upon this basis a "truly

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.29.

critical" philosophy. This requires that he attempt to make more concrete Hegel's concept of the human essence, particularly with regard to specifying the social conditions which prevent it from obtaining a concrete existence. Marx's project does this by concentrating more closely upon the particular way in which human self-creativity is manifested in the society of his own day. From within this philosophy emerges a more concrete form of the concept of essence, which nevertheless received its first philosophical articulation in Hegel's work.

3.2: The Concept of Essence in Marx's Critical Philosophy

The problematic which confronted Marx after the critique of Hegel had been completed was that of making specific what Hegel had revealed in general so as to disclose the ways in which capitalist society prevented human beings from being what they essentially are, freely self-creating. As Marx explains this task,

The task of history, therefore, once the world beyond the truth has disappeared, is to establish the truth of this world. The immediate task of philosophy, which is at the service of history, once the holy form of human self-estrangement has been unmasked, is to unmask estrangement in its unholy forms.⁵⁰

In order to unmask estrangement in its social, political and economic guises, one must have at one's disposal a concept of non-estranged or essential humanity. If a given social form, in this case capitalism, is to be criticized because it mitigates against the realization of humanity's essential nature one must have a concept of this essential nature. If the theory is going to be more than utopic dreaming, it must be derived from history itself. It must identify what is positive and worth preserving in the order which it criticizes, (how it has contributed to the development of humanity's essential powers) as well as

⁵⁰Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Law. Introduction," in, *Marx-Engels, Collected Works, Vol.3*, p.176.

illuminate those dynamics which prevent this positive content from being fully expressed (how, despite its progressive attributes, capitalism has systematic tendencies which necessarily impair the unfettered⁵¹ realization of the human essence. Hegel showed the general form of such a concept, it is up to Marx to deploy it critically.

To do so, Marx will make some alterations with regard to the Hegelian concept. Before these are considered, however, it is important to note what Marx is not saying the essence of man is. He does not put in the place of Hegel's self-creation in general labour conceived of as purely instrumental activity. This is attributed to him by many postmodern critics. Baudrillard, for example, charges him with,

...[generalizing] the economic mode of rationality over the entire expanse of human⁵² history as the generic mode of human becoming.

⁵¹"Unfettered" should not be taken to imply that if a genuinely socialist society were to be constructed everyone would be magically transformed into a creative genius, the Romantic "beautiful soul" as Hegel sarcastically dismisses this in Chapter Six of *The Phenomenology*. Unfettered refers to the overcoming of the socially imposed constraints upon self-realization which are specific to capitalism, primarily the subordination of the satisfaction of basic human needs to the need to make profit. I do not intend to suggest that all unpleasant tasks will disappear under socialism, but only that in a situation where the biological needs of people are met through the use of collectively created wealth, people would have enhanced opportunities to examine themselves, discover their interests and aptitudes, and attempt to realize these to the best of their ability.

⁵²Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, (Telos Press: St.Louis), 1975, p.33.

Although Marx does prioritize the economic moment of human being, he does not reduce humanity to a creature whose sole meaningful function is quantitative production. Indeed, Marx's critique of political economy is, we shall see, designed to reveal the determinate social dynamics which enslave humanity to the reign of instrumentality and subordinate quality to quantity. As he states in the 1844 Manuscripts, "... labour is only an expression of human activity in alienated form."⁵³ Hegel too, as has been shown, failed to note the difference between "human activity" and the alienated form of this activity. Hegel understood the general freedom of the human species, but could not see how this can be undermined in social conditions which impoverish human activity by turning it into merely a means. The concept of "human activity" which Marx contrasts with labour is a concept with a content much richer than that of labour. To begin an investigation into this content a more complete definition of Marx's "human activity" is necessary.

Perhaps the most complete general definition of what Marx considers to be the content of the essence of human being is contained in the following passage from the 1844 Manuscripts,

... free conscious activity is man's species

⁵³Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p.159.

character... an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or for its young. It produces one-sidedly whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, while man produces when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom.⁵⁴

As in Hegel, Marx here offers a concept of human essence which is neither a priori nor reductionist. As well, it satisfies the two functions which essence has played in traditional philosophy. Humanity distinguishes itself as a unique species through its transformative activity in the world. It creates its own life conditions out of the given world. This was already Hegel's insight. Marx adds to this, however, the qualification that to be human, conscious activity must be free in a more concrete sense than in Hegel. Full positive freedom demands that the self-realizing activities of each individual in a given society stem from a self-determined project. The critical evaluation of a given society from this perspective cannot ignore the concrete power relations involved at the workplace, ie, the place in which individuals engage in their most socially and individually important practices.

At this point, however, a dilemma appears. The argument being advanced depends upon the concept of essence in both of its aspects being thoroughly historical. Yet, the critical side of the concept is but a possibility, it

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.113.

has not achieved a concrete historical existence. It is therefore difficult to see how Marx has derived the "free" character of human activity without appealing to an historically ungrounded abstraction.

This important difficulty will be investigated by first examining the general relationship between human history and human activity. That humanity exists and that it exists differently in different periods is a truism. The differences in the manner of existence (cultural, political, aesthetic, economic and so forth) have many causes, yet there would be no differences, and indeed no humanity, without the self-conscious activity, the creative praxis, of individuals within definite societies. The fundamental ground of the differences throughout history and across cultures is the self-creative ability of human beings. To understand humanity completely it is of course not enough to merely cite this principle, one must study the concrete appearances in which this essence is manifested. Nevertheless, to explain the existence of the species itself, and therefore the ground of the existence of all the determinations of it, one must make appeal to the activities of human beings themselves. There would be no humanity if it lacked, "the capacity to construct a project and erect it in reality⁵⁵," as John McMurtry succinctly encapsulates the

⁵⁵John McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, (Princeton University Press: Princeton), 1978, p.31.

meaning of Marx's concept of essence. Marx has not arbitrarily selected this facet of humanity and posited it as humanity's essence. Rather, he is stating philosophically (along with Hegel) what humanity has already itself revealed about itself. Self-Conscious activity is the historically manifested sine qua non of human being.

However, this capacity for creative praxis is not a simple natural, transhistorical constant of human being. It is not an abstraction separate from its actual modes of realization. What humanity is capable of and how it goes about realizing these possibilities is dependent upon historical, social, economic, and political conditions. The development and transformation of these is at the same time the history of the development of the human essence because in this movement humanity has expanded, enhanced, or simply further differentiated its creative capacities. Thus, as the differentia specifica of human being, Marx's concept does not abolish or abstract from the complexity and plurality of human existence. On the contrary, it highlights precisely those aspects of humanity from which these attributes emerge and which in turn further effect and develop.

There is still the other aspect of essence to deal with, that is, that aspect of it which serves as a telos and as the basis for a critique of social conditions which mitigate against its realization. The essence of being

human, it shall be recalled, was not simply to engage in conscious activity, but rather to engage in free conscious activity. The historical character of this aspect is more difficult to determine, since it involves trying to determine how this aspect could be both disclosed by history as a real possibility, and yet not be an actual component of (at least most) actual practices. There are three components to the historical derivation of the essence as possibility which shall be examined separately.

History, writes Marx is the, "self-creation of man through human labour.⁵⁶" For this reason, the species is, in general, free. The human world is not simply the natural world, but rather the socio-historical world. As such, it is a world created in all of its aspects through the collective activity of humans. If a society is unfree it is still a situation of unfreedom which has resulted from specific ways of social, political, and economic organization and not from the actions of any higher power (divine punishment, for example). Unlike animals, who are determined for all time by their instincts and habitat⁵⁷, humanity can change its conditions of existence by changing its social organization, and this it can do self-

⁵⁶Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p.145.

⁵⁷Of course, animals change and adapt, but so far no animal species has been observed to consciously plan and collectively transform its environment and its nature.

consciously. What humans are depends ultimately upon what they make themselves to be, which in turn is conditioned by previous action objectified as the given world into which one is born.

Yet, this general character of the human species is not, in situations of social unfreedom, the manifest reality of individual human beings. The worker who is dependent for his job, and therefore his means of survival, upon a capitalist, who is in turn dependent upon the dynamics of the market, is not concretely free, ie, is not living according to self-developed plan but is rather at the mercy of *social* dynamics indifferent to his needs and his will⁵⁸. This situation is an historically determined one. Humanity arrived at this point through its own activity, which is, of course, determined by the given context in which action must take place. This universal act of self-creation is free, because the tendencies, dynamics and so forth which govern definite actions are all properties which emerge from human society and history. Yet, as we noted above, the dynamics which govern definite societies can be dynamics which limit specific human beings to unfree practices. Nevertheless,

⁵⁸It should be noted, because it has oft been neglected by leftists befuddled by a technological hubris, that there are most likely natural forces, especially catastrophes, which will likely forever elude our control no matter what form of society we exist in. The limits which must be overcome in order for positive freedom to be fully manifest are historical, and therefore changeable by human action.

because these individuals are, as members of the human species, (ie, the only universally self-creative species), essentially self-creative beings, they have the potential to change the dynamics which are responsible for the unfree nature of a specific society. In this way, the self-manifested differentia of human being is transformed into a concept which, when employed in a critical philosophy, illuminates the gap which exists between the essence of humanity and its particular form of existence.

This way of deriving the free character of human activity does require abstracting from particular conditions. This does not entail that one ends in metaphysical speculation. There is no appeal made to extra-human, extra-historical factors. As was noted in the previous discussion of Rorty, the formal identity of the propositions, "Humans are Good" (assuming, of course, that "Good" is employed as an immutable concept) and "Humans are self-creative" belies a radical difference of meaning. The first ignores history and reduces human beings to an abstract identity, the second reveals why humans exist historically and comprehends their diversity, "In Marx's view," Istvan Meszaros observes, "man is neither egoistic nor altruistic. He is made by his own activity into what he is at any given time."⁵⁹

⁵⁹Meszaros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation*, p.148.

Notwithstanding the unfree character of contemporary society, it is the case that particular practices within it hint at the greater possibilities inherent in the individuals who compose them. This is especially the case with art in which the creative powers of humanity are most brilliantly revealed. Indeed, the freedom displayed within aesthetic activity has prompted some, such as John McMurtry, to posit artistic creation as the paradigm of free creative praxis.⁶⁰ The relative merits of such a position cannot be debated here, although it should be mentioned that for Marx any praxis which expresses the creative capacity of human nature in a well-rounded employment of mental and physical faculties is a free, human use. This applies well beyond the range of artistic creation unless that category is expanded significantly. Thus, not only in art, but in hobbies, in work performed outside of the factory for its own sake (restoring an old car for example) and so on is the possibility of free conscious activity disclosed.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, this possibility is disclosed in the struggles of people against unessential, unfree, conditions. In so far as people struggle for a society in which they can realize themselves according to their own projects, they reveal that their present existence does not express what they are in essence, and at the same

⁶⁰McMurtry, *The Structure of Marx's World-View*, p.25.

time reveal that this essence is a real component of their being. The struggle against social limitations not only reveals the nature of the limitations, but simultaneously the nature of what is limited, in this case the free character of creative praxis. The development of theory from the content disclosed by the struggles occurring in his day guided Marx from very early on in his philosophical endeavour. Take for example the following assessment of the struggles of weavers in Silesia written in 1844,

First of all recall the song of the weavers, that bold call to struggle in which there is not even a mention of hearth and home, factory or district, but in which the proletariat at once, in striking, sharp, unrestrained and powerful manner proclaims its⁶¹ opposition to the society of private property.

The working class revealed itself as a universal class because it struggled against that society which limited the realization of their essence, ie, it made that "free conscious activity" an impossibility. However, in struggling against it, the workers also revealed that free creative praxis is not an arbitrary or merely pre-existing goal, it is a real although repressed component of human individuals and as such an historically emergent goal.

Marx's argument as to the historical nature of the essence of human being in its aspect as an unrealized possibility thus has three aspects. To recapitulate them

⁶¹Marx, "Critical Marginal Notes on the Article, 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform'," in, *Marx-Engels, Collected Works, Vol.3.*, p.201.

concisely: i) this is disclosed through a comparison between the freedom of the human species viewed as the creator of its own life conditions, and the unfreedom of individuals in given societies ii) in the glimpses offered of free creative praxis in art and those freely chosen activities people engage in outside of the workplace, and iii) in struggles against the fundamental structures of the given society. There is no appeal made here to any ahistorical component of human being. The essence which is contrasted with impoverished existence is concretely manifested by real, active individuals. The theory in which this contrast is established is in fundamental respects a critical theory. It does not simply analyze the functional dynamics of a society, it rather illuminates how these dynamics make impossible the realization of the higher possibilities contained within the human essence as these have been revealed in the ways discussed above. Herbert Marcuse sums up this logic of critical theory forcefully:

The tension between actuality and potentiality, between what men and things could be and what they are in fact is one of the dynamic focal points of this theory of society. It sees therein not a transcendental structure of Being and an immutable ontological difference, but an historical relationship which can be transformed in this life by real men; the incongruity between potentiality and actuality incites knowledge to become part of the practice of transformation.⁶²

This transformation is directed at the realization of what

⁶²Marcuse, *Negations*, p.69.

people are in essence, ie, at a society in which people are free because they have the means to explore what they are and what they can do. In other words, it aims at a society in which difference could be truly manifest because the differences would be self-created within a context of unity and partnership.

In order to directly counter the charges levelled against Marx by such theorists as Baudrillard it is necessary to explore in more detail the important contrasts between the mode of existence of creative praxis under capitalism, and its highest possibilities. At the same time, Marx's divergence from Hegel will become most apparent. For Marx, free creative praxis cannot exist if it is confined necessarily to one particular sphere as it is in Hegel. Its universality must be more developed, the individual must in principle be able to explore his aptitude for any task whatsoever, so long as this task does not impair the ability of others to do the same. As he wrote in the Communist Manifesto, "the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all."⁶³ This is not the case in capitalism, in which the free development of humanity is subordinated to the rule of the law of value. The life of the capitalist turns the life of

⁶³Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party, in, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Robert C. Tucker ed., (W.W. Norton and Co.: New York), 1978, p.491.

the worker, in its active and practical aspects, into a servile and instrumental activity.

The instrumentalization of creative praxis under capitalism is the hallmark of alienated labour. It is here that Marx clearly differentiates himself from Hegel and from the position attributed to him in postmodern readings. By specifying the difference between alienated and non-alienated labour Marx at once arrives at the concept he needs to criticize capitalist society, and discovers the basic dynamics of that society which mitigate against the realization of human freedom. Thus, the critique is rooted in a knowledge of essence and directed against the specific dynamics which daily reproduce workers as unfree beings. The dynamics which alienate labour are found first and foremost within the production process not because Marx has arbitrarily posited the economic mode of rationality as the "generic mode of human becoming," as Baudrillard claimed, but because within the production process the worker is reduced to a means under the control of another. This is what Marx means by alienated labour:

First, the fact that labour is external to the worker, that it does not belong to his essential being, that in it therefore he does not confirm but denies himself, does not freely develop his mental and physical energies but mortifies his body and ruins his mind.⁶⁴

⁶⁴Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p.110.

This instrumentalization of labour is but the most basic form of the instrumentalization of the entire realm of the social and natural world within capitalism.

This instrumentalization extends to such universal lengths because capitalism depends upon the exchange of commodities. It therefore reduces everything, including the human body and imagination, into articles for sale. Nothing appears as what it is in itself, but firstly as an abstraction, as a price. Even human sensibilities, the immediate openings of the human to the qualitative nature of things become reduced to seeking only the quantitative aspect of things, ie, the potential profit that could be created from them. In one of the more striking passages in the *1844 Manuscripts* Marx decries this immiseration of human sensibility,

The sense caught up in crude practical need has only a restricted sense. For the starving man it is not the human form of food which exists, but only its abstract being as food... The care burdened man in need has no sense for finest play; the dealer in minerals sees only the commercial value but not the beauty and unique nature of the mineral, he has no mineralogical sense. Thus, the objectification of the human essence, both in its theoretical and practical aspects, is required to make man's sense a human sense, as well as to create the sense corresponding to the entire wealth of human and natural substance.⁶⁵

The dynamics of capitalist production and reproduction, driven as they are by the need to continually augment profitability, are the root cause of the reduction of the

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.141.

world to a truly abstract uniformity, price. In a forest the capitalist (and, it is true, the worker who must work to stay alive) does not see the unique qualities of the various species, but only the profits to be turned by converting it to pulp and lumber. In a poem the capitalist publisher does not see a metaphorical opening up of the nature of the world, but either a saleable book or a waste of energy and resources.

The objectification of the human essence of which Marx speaks above, on the other hand, is a call for the unbounded realization of human creative potential. It is directed at the instrumentalism and reductionism of capitalist society. This is not designed to be a mere romantic harkening after an innocence which has been lost. Rather, it is meant to be a supersession of capitalist society in an Hegelian way, ie, a supersession which incorporates the positive achievements of the superseded moment.⁶⁶ This transcendence is not aimed

⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the political, economic, historical and social evidence which would have to be marshalled to substantiate the contemporary viability of such a project cannot be entered into here. Nor can the possibility of reformist projects to create a more equitable capitalism which would enhance positive freedom *on a global scale* be adequately assessed. Given that the enhancement of positive freedom within capitalism is contingent upon the enhancement of the rate of profit, and given the historically proven propensity of capitalism to go into periodic crisis, the possibility of reforming the waste of human potential out of the system appears unlikely, although not impossible. Our aim here is not to predict the future, which is on the whole impossible, but rather to highlight its brightest possibility, which the material conditions of contemporary society make a real possibility whose realization remains contingent.

at reducing the world to an abstract standard of equality, to a universal workhouse of grey over-alls and crew cuts. Marx was a severe critic of such reductionistic programs, as is clearly disclosed in the following passage,

How little this annulment of private property is really an appropriation is in fact proved by the abstract negation of the entire world of culture and civilization, the regression to an unnatural simplicity of the poor and undemanding man who has not only failed to go beyond private property, but has not even reached it.⁶⁷

Thus, the realization of the human essence in a positive way has historical conditions and is therefore not an arbitrary and restrictive telos guiding an eschatological movement. A society in which basic human needs would be satisfied as a matter of course presupposes the productive capacity, distribution systems and so forth necessary to supply a large population. The realization of this possibility is purely contingent, dependent at this point in history only upon the emergence and the shape of social struggles which consciously aim for such a society.

What would be overcome in such a scenario are the external limitations imposed upon creative praxis by capitalism. The only limits which would remain are the immanent limits of contributing one's share to the store of communal wealth, and beyond this, the limits of individual interests, talents, and aptitudes. The realization of the

⁶⁷Marx, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, p.134.

historically developed possibilities of the human essence is not found in a world beyond time and place, but rather in the this-worldly possibility for employing existent social wealth to satisfy human need, thus freeing people to create themselves in the ways they themselves decide. Such a possible society would be a human one to the extent that it placed no arbitrary external limits on people, that all limitations were self-limitations,

Assume man to be man and his relationship to the world to be a human one, then you can exchange only love for love, trust for trust, etc. If you want to enjoy art, you must be an artistically cultivated person, if you want to exercise influence on other people, you must be a person with a stimulating and encouraging effect on other people. Everyone of your relations to man and to nature must be a specific expression corresponding to the object of your will, of your real individual life.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.169.

Chapter Four: History and Philosophy Reconciled?

The problematic from which this study has proceeded concerns the possibility of discovering within the work of Hegel and Marx a concept of essence which fulfilled that concept's philosophical duties, the illumination of the specific nature and highest potential of things, the human being specifically, while overcoming the abstract and restrictive form this concept has generally had. The postmodern theorists surveyed have denied this possibility and have included Hegel and Marx within their one-sided reading of the metaphysical tradition.

When Hegel first prioritized the self-creative nature of humanity, he uncovered the self-grounding nature of humanity as well. If the essence of human being is its self-creative nature, then humanity no longer requires any transcendent basis for its nature and possibilities. If it is of the essence of being human that one create oneself, then this essence is necessarily dynamic, for collective and individual modes of expressing this must vary historically and culturally. The socio-cultural determination of the self-creative capacities of human being thus also involves the concept of essence in a critical problematic. In so far as a given social totality transforms the self-creative character of humanity into an unfree and instrumental

process, it at the same time becomes subject to critique. The theory which carries out this critique must base itself upon a specific analysis of the concrete dynamics which impede the full realization of human self-creativity.

Marx sought out these dynamics primarily within the economic apparatus of capitalist society not because he thought human beings were solely homo economicus, but because it is in the relations of production that the most basic dynamics of social reproduction are found. The analysis of production is not only an objective analysis, but an expose of how capitalism distorts the essential powers of humanity. As Herbert Marcuse has commented,

If political economy can gain such central importance it is clear, from a critical point of view, that it must be treated from the outset as more than just another science or specialized scientific field. Instead, it must be⁶⁹ seen as a problematic involving the whole being of man.

The problematic viewed universally is still one worth exploring. Capitalism has undoubtedly altered in many significant respects since Marx's day, and has vastly improved the conditions of existence for most people in the wealthy areas of the globe, but its central dynamic, the continual production of surplus value and profit, remains the dominant imperative of existence. If anything, the commodifying tendencies have expanded and intensified since

⁶⁹Herbert Marcuse, *From Luther to Popper*, (Verso: London), 1988, p.5.

the nineteenth century. The problem of liberating human creative praxis from its unfree form thus remains so long as this dynamic rules the world of humans and things.

Any engagement with such a universal problem has been renounced by postmodern theorists. Indeed, this is entailed by their rejection of a concept of human essence. If there is no truth to human beings beyond what they are "discursively constituted" to be, then there are no easy to see reasons why theorists should concern themselves with the question of how to establish a society in which complete positive freedom exists. Michel Foucault states the consequences of repudiating such an aspect of being sharply;

To all those who still wish to talk about man, his reign or his liberation, to all those who still ask themselves questions about what man is in his essence, to all those who wish to take him as their starting point in their attempt to reach the truth... we can only answer with a philosophical laugh⁷⁰ - which means, to a certain extent, a silent one.

"Man" abstractly conceived, as good, as evil, as rational, as passionate can safely be discarded as a standpoint. Humanity as the creator of its own life through its own actions is a standpoint of a different type because it serves as the self-manifested ground for all of the above-mentioned qualities. The theory which bases itself upon this new standpoint and which draws the radical implications from it is also ready to abandon the abstractly universal

⁷⁰Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (Vintage Books: New York), 1973, p.343.

claims of previous philosophies which based themselves upon static and abstract identities.

Such a critical philosophy can carry out its universal tasks contextually, and its contextually determined conclusions can be expounded universally. Capitalism is a global economic system, but it does not operate exactly the same everywhere. Local specificities and the concrete effects it has in different locations must always be front and centre if one's critical approach to it is to "unmask estrangement in its unholy forms." Yet, if this theory is to be truly radical, if it is to get to the root of the problem, it must also tie local problems back to the universal problem. As such, theory expresses the possibility of solidarity, of unity in diversity in a struggle against the homogenizing and instrumentalizing effects of capitalism.

For Marx, a fixed formal system which explained the totality of history and could predict the future was never his goal. In his youth he criticized Hegel for subsuming all of reality under the categories of his *Logic*, in his maturity he responded harshly to critics who attempted to see within his work a "materialist" logic of historical becoming independent of human action,

[my critic] must be all means transform my historical sketch of the development of capitalism in Western Europe into an historical-philosophical theory of universal development pre-determined by fate for all nations, whatever the historic circumstances...

If one studies each of the phenomena by itself and then compares them with each other, one would easily find the key to each phenomenon, but one would never thereby attain a universal key to a general historico-philosophical theory whose greatest advantage lies in its being beyond history.⁷¹

On the basis of Marx's investigations no one is entitled to posit as the necessary end of history a communist society. Yet, if this real possibility were to be realized, it would define a social system in which all people would for the first time in history be free to realize their self-given projects. In so far as today the majority of the world's people are very far from existing as autonomously self-creative beings, the time is not upon us where a critical theory with universal intentions is obsolete. The historicization and concretization philosophy undergoes in becoming critical is not, therefore, an end to philosophy, for the universal aim is preserved in the specific focus. Indeed, such a transformation is a continuation of philosophy's classical task, the search for the rationality and truth of the world.

The unity of freedom and reason, has, since Plato, been a staple of Western thought at its best. The problem was not in linking these two, but in failing to perceive that their unity, if it is to be a meaningful moment of every human being's life, must be achieved on earth, in society,

⁷¹Karl Marx, "Letter to the St.Petersburgh Journal, *Homeland Notes*, in, *The Letters of Karl Marx*, Saul K. Padover, ed., (Vintage Books: New York), 1977, pp. 321-322.

through collective human action. Such a new form of philosophizing is certainly not fully formed in Marx's work. The last quotation cited could be understood as a challenge to continue the task begun in Hegel and concretized in Marx. This task is the ongoing observation of humanity, an observation which is open to the new, is aware that the ground could someday slip from under it, but also an observing which will not put itself to rest while it still witnesses the systematic impoverishment of human beings, while it can still reveal a gap between what we are essentially, and what we are in existence.

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